

Labour

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

Le Travail

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



Bonnie Morgan, *Ordinary Saints: Women, Work, and Faith in Newfoundland* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 2019)

Vicki S. Hallett

Volume 88, automne 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1084989ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2021v88.0014>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Hallett, V. (2021). Compte rendu de [Bonnie Morgan, *Ordinary Saints: Women, Work, and Faith in Newfoundland* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 2019)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 88, 189–190.

<https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2021v88.0014>

All Rights Reserved © Canadian Committee on Labour History, 2021

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

é
rudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

pas de l'Occident et qui définissent une solidarité radicale. En conclusion, « Notre monde est brisé. Mais il peut en être autrement » (325).

MAÏKA SONDARJEE
Université d'Ottawa

Bonnie Morgan, *Ordinary Saints: Women, Work, and Faith in Newfoundland* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 2019)

BONNIE MORGAN'S *Ordinary Saints: Women, Work, and Faith in Newfoundland* is a microhistory examining the lived religiosity of Anglican women in a string of interconnected outposts on the southern shores of Conception Bay, Newfoundland and Labrador. Focusing on the turbulent middle decades of the 20th century, the book traces the evolving relationships between working-class women's church groups and Church officialdom, alongside the shifting socio-economic realities of the transition from Dominion to province.

This historical study is attentive to the rich detail of embodied religious experience and practice, and alive to the intersections of gender, class, and geographical context. Using a mixed-methods approach that includes archival research, oral history, analysis of material culture and census data, and a dab of personal recollection, Morgan weaves a finely-textured net to capture the complex interactions that allowed Anglican women to keep body and soul together.

Reminiscent of Hilda Chaulk Murray's now-classic *More Than 50%: Woman's Life in a Newfoundland Outport, 1900-1950* (St. John's: Flanker Press, 2010), which chronicled the often-egalitarian labour of heterosexual couples in early 20th-century Bonavista Bay, and Willeen Keough's *The Slender Thread: Irish*

Women on the Southern Avalon, 1750-1860 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), Morgan's text similarly points to the need to re-evaluate the lived realities of patriarchal societies in which women's work was both necessary and highly valued. Dealing more specifically with the interconnections of work and faith, Morgan's book uses a gender-specific lens to look for the ways in which Newfoundland women navigated their lives using their own moral compasses under the auspices of male-dominated religious institutions.

This is familiar and familial territory for Morgan. She has previously studied Anglican church women, and contributed a very fine chapter entitled "Activist Anglicans and Rector's Wives: The Impact of Class and Gender on Women's Church Work in St. John's" to Linda Cullum and Marilyn Porter's edited collection *Creating This Place: Women, Family, and Class in St. John's, 1900-1950*. In her current work, Morgan shifts focus to her childhood home and discusses her personal connection to the place and the people about whom she writes. While this perspective lends a deeply knowledgeable and respectful tone to the inquiry, it could also be analyzed more critically with an eye to the problematic and productive entanglements it presents for the author as both insider and outsider. There is a great deal of feminist scholarship to draw upon here that would enrich the methodological texture of the work.

Much like in her earlier study, Morgan's research here is painstaking and now offers an analysis of differing cultural and class sensibilities between what are locally referred to as "Town" and "The Bay." Though, it is important to note that these dualities should not be understood as fixed or impermeable, for they were neither. As Morgan's text shows, people,

goods, labour, and religious ideologies flowed between the capital city and its outlying regions with ever increasing frequency over the course of the past century.

Navigating this burgeoning tide were the Anglican working-class women who lived in the small communities along the south coast of Conception Bay. As the economy shifted from agriculture and fishing to more wage-based industries, and Church officials took increasing interest in the affairs of lay organizations, women were pressured to take on the role of “domesticated helpmeet” (234) at home and in their church communities.

Morgan contends that this did not sit well with women who had for generations comfortably run their households, worked farm fields and fish flakes, tended to most bodily and spiritual needs between birth and death, and organized church groups like the Church of England Women’s Association (CEWA) with a keen sense of economy and an ethic of mutual benevolence. Their work and their faith were the warp and weft of everyday life, and according to Morgan, while they “lived religion, they also lived feminism” (xxi).

This thesis is supported by CEWA records from various hamlets along the shore, and interviews with former CEWA members and their descendants. These sources reveal that contrary to official Church doctrine and the usual way of doing things in middle-upper class “ladies auxiliaries,” the women of Conception Bay were most concerned with working collaboratively to support one another and their working-class communities, rather than performing charitable deeds for those less fortunate, or raising money to fund large purchases by the clergy.

This collaborative work was a natural extension of the home-making that so many of the women had in common, as wives of farmers or fishers. In their

households, these women were partners who took on difficult and necessary physical tasks as well as spiritual labour. As such, women “did not passively accept clerical authority or the teachings, doctrines, and dogma of their church” (243). Instead, they lived and worked their faith in ways that were meaningful to them: visiting their sick “sisters” and supporting them with money they had raised from tea sales; cleaning the church; knitting for soldiers overseas; hosting fundraising dances and dinners; and making practical textiles such as burial shrouds and aprons.

Morgan’s text, through its scrupulous research and careful attention to people’s narratives, demonstrates clearly that all these women’s tasks were imbued with respect for Biblical tradition, and respect for one another. However, it is left to the reader to ponder whether the women in these mutually benevolent organizations might have worked to support sisters who explicitly challenged the hetero-patriarchal order of family, church, and community, or who experienced the more violent expressions of power that are part of everyday life across religious, geographic, and class divides. Such things are usually absent from the official record and/or not discussed with outsiders, and so are notoriously difficult to investigate. Thus, it is perhaps unfair to expect them to surface in this book. But, a text that highlights the complex “patchwork” of women’s lives and the “feminist consciousness” of its subjects, and does enjoy an insider perspective, needs to acknowledge the coarser threads that are inevitably, and often secretively, woven throughout the tapestry of our lives.

VICKI S. HALLETT

Memorial University