

Donica Belisle, *Purchasing Power: Women and the Rise of Canadian Consumer Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020). 262 pp. Paperback \$29.95.

Donica Belisle's latest publication, *Purchasing Power: Women and the Rise of Canadian Consumer Culture*, is an important addition to the history of Canadian consumer culture, identity, and politics for several reasons. First, the book directs attention to the consumer side of the Canadian economy. And second, in place of a producer-centered narrative, Belisle contributes a new perspective to examine the ways in which citizenship was predicated on "proper" consumption (91, 93). According to Belisle, consumption as a means of political and economic participation helped reinforce and define Canadian citizenship. The parameters of this consumer citizenship placed both non-white and poor women consumer participation as the antithesis of bourgeois sophistication—the antithesis of Canadian nationhood (5). Belisle charts the consumer culture of women, typically position as wives and mothers, from the 1890s to 1930s, and emphasizes the diversity of issues: the temperance movement, conservation during total war, the home economist's movement, consumer co-operation, consumption in rural areas, and fashion. These, the author argues, were central to the Canadian experience. Belisle convincingly demonstrates how the power to purchase, reveals not only the link between citizenship and nationalism, but was a central way to construct an identity, reinforce status, and achieve a sense of belonging and liberation. The notion of purchasing power allowed middle-and-upper-class white women to include and exclude others from this idea of true citizenship.

Purchasing Power first connects consumption and white nationalism to the temperance movement of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) prior to prohibition in 1918. In this first chapter, Belisle argues that the WCTU helped define consumer culture for English Canada during the twentieth century. Their advocacy of "temperance-approved goods" reflected the priorities of mothers and wives (18-19). Their endorsement of goods like Red Rose Tea and Purity Flour both supported the nation's war effort by purchasing Canadian-made products, and as a result, made such products household names (23). Through economic participation and patriotism of the WCTU, Belisle spotlights how this evangelical consumer movement was maternalistic at its core. These women sought to abolish alcohol in the Canadian military and at home and to channel money spent on alcohol back to the female household manager. This way, temperance could improve the quality of family life and create upward mobility; it was a vision that "placed

women and their consumer desires in the center and called on men to use their drink money on their families” (38, 41).

The reader’s introduction to the consumer advocacy of the WCTU, who linked the purchase of temperance products to ‘good citizenship’, creates a clean segue into the subsequent chapters. The First World War, as Belisle makes clear, further defined traditional family roles: with men upheld as the labourer and breadwinner, and women as household shopper. Belisle explores various government campaigns, from victory gardens to the inauguration of the Canada Food Board in 1918. Women were to embrace food-control measures and as consumer citizens it became “their responsibility to spend, save, cook, and garden their way to victory” making “luxury and extravagance an offense to all the right-thinking people” (44, 62). Much like the WCTU’s intentions to strengthen the nation (and the family) through a ban on alcohol, pro-war women needed to conserve and purchase carefully to fulfill a sense of what Belisle calls “patriotic national consumerism” as Canada navigated through the social, political, and economic conditions of war (71).

Although the duration of First World War redefined women’s consumer spending as a period of thrift, anti-luxury, and conservation, Belisle highlights how the pre-and-post-war era embodied a capitalist consumer mentality. Through an examination of home economics curricula in post-secondary institutions across Canada, establishment of the Women’s Institute, and role of fashion, the three body chapters reflect how modern women were encouraged to consider themselves “professional consumers” and the importance of ownership and display of consumer commodities (73, 81). Adding to recent Canadian consumer historiography—which has often focused on the city—Belisle contends that rural white Canadian women viewed their consumption as key to public life, and the formation of the Women’s Institute (WI), the largest rural women’s organization, in 1897 coalesced such a vision (100). Participation as public and economic citizens through the WI was manifested through matters of domestic labour, farming, and handiwork but also through political action. The rural women of the WI lobbied for government intervention in the marketplace to ensure that, as consumer citizens, their rights were protected (109). Canadian post-secondary curricula in proper home management included lessons in cleaning, cooking, and childcare, while promoting homemaking as a form of civic participation. Facilitators of this training had criticized those who were poor, non-white, and non-Western European for their perceived inadequate diets and lack of “White cultural values” and reinforced their exclusion depicted from the bounds of Canadian citizenship (91, 94). The home economics movement, Belisle argues, helped shape the modern consumer citizen as “explicitly white, bourgeois, and feminine” (97).

In her final chapter, Belisle explores the role of Canadian women in the co-operative movement in the first half of the twentieth century. One strength of *Purchasing Power* is its structure. Just as the first chapter introduced the tie between

consumption and citizenship, this last chapter continues to do so but documents how women's groups sought to make the marketplace more responsive to their needs as consumer citizens (148). The 'Toronto Housewives' League, formed in 1913, was one such group. Belisle explores their boycotts, shopping behaviours, and market price watching initiatives (164). Throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s, several co-operative food stores across Canada were operated by women. However, despite advocacy for lower prices, convenience, and higher quality produce, women of different classes continued to clash (154). Belisle contends that these co-op stores implicitly catered to the interests of middle-class rather than working-class women, given that they encouraged to buy in bulk, and the focus on individual shoppers often "scapegoated [these] women rather than challenging major corporations" (165).

Although the fourth chapter, "For Whom Do We Dress?", tracks an interesting debate throughout the women's press about morality, the body, and freedom, Belisle's argument is less convincing here. In this chapter, Belisle observes two main ideas of the women's press prior to 1940: women's bodies were sexual by nature and men were perceived as "instigators of sexual activity" drawn to "dresses that are nothing short of indecent" (136, 146). While ownership and display of commodities, such as elegant dress, were tied to ideas of status, belonging, and bodily liberation, the linkage of women's bodies to the morality of the nation persisted. Despite a clear link here between fashion and citizenship, much of Belisle's argument through *Purchasing Power* appears through food—whether temperance goods, conservation and regulation, or the operation of co-operative stores—and the turn toward garments appears disjointed. Belisle does make quick mention of how fashionable women and "healthy girls" were the "presumed object of public consumption," (132) but further exploration of desired body-types, diet, or nutrition to achieve such perceived idea of health and beauty—therefore meeting the so-called requirements of Canadian nationhood—within her discussion of WI's and the home economics movement, would have been a more seamless fit for the scope of the book.

Purchasing Power is an excellent contribution to the growing body of Canadian consumer history and how women were linked to notions of consumption and white nationalism. The race for women to embody being modern helped market the notion of "the Canadian way"—a distinctly white, heteronormative, and middle-class ideal (10). The strength of Belisle's work is an exhaustive research of women's press, particularly *Woman's Century*, which helps remind the reader to look at sources generated by the consumers themselves (6). By examining consumer-made sources, Belisle successfully charts how these diverse consumer issues were driven by a desire for public, economic, and political participation—and power.

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