

ic statements, including the latter's ambiguous stance on complete emancipation for women. They find two main themes, namely domesticity being lessened as a role for women and gender equality being advocated unequivocally.

Having provided the background to Bebel's ideology of emancipation, the authors turn to Bebel's relations with women, specifically his wife Julie, his daughter Frieda, the feminist agitator Gertrud Guillaume-Schack, Bebel's translator Hope Adams, and the head of the socialist women's organization, Clara Zetkin. Though informed with crucial evidence from correspondence, this part of the study appears the weakest in an otherwise very strong book. Bebel's personal practice of equality is shown in the shift from paternalism to partnership with his wife, in child-rearing practices and in his choice of associates. But, the "common ground" with Guillaume-Schack is thin and the relationship to Adams very tenuous. However, the Zetkin-Bebel relationship is crucial and a separate chapter is appropriately devoted to it. Lopes and Roth seek to "trace the development of a specifically socialist form of backlash against women's equality" (201) in Zetkin's approach. In contrast to other historians, they illustrate that "Zetkin was considered the leading female exponent of Bebel's ideas at the very time she transformed his doctrine into something other than what it had been." (201) Bebel's book offered a program for gender equality; Zetkin pushed for suffrage but also protective legislation. With the latter she returned toward what Bebel had denied: the assumption that all women would be wives and mothers.

This significant study should force a rethinking about men's and women's feminism. It certainly moves toward restoring one of the first and classic analyses of women history in the 19th century to its rightful place as a crucial and central text.

Dieter K. Buse
Laurentian University

Thomas C. Jepsen, *My Sisters Telegraphic: Women in the Telegraph Office, 1864-1950* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000).

Venus Green, *Race on the Line: Gender, Labor and Technology in the Bell Systems, 1880-1980* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

Writing for the journal *Good Words* in 1877, Anthony Trollope paid a visit to the Central Telegraph Office in London. The telegraph was then four decades old, and the wonder of its much-heralded capacity to speed human intelligence

from place to place in the blink of an eye had already worn a little thin. Earlier commentators might have waxed rhapsodic about the utility and convenience of the device, or boldly conjectured that it would unite all humankind in a spirit of universal peace and mutual understanding. Trollope, however, reserves his interest not for the telegraph itself, but for its operators, almost all of whom, he is surprised to learn, are young women. “The stranger . . . will think a great deal more about the young women than the telegraphy,” he claims. “To me [the chief attraction of the place] was the condition of the girls – their appearance, their welfare, their respectability, their immediate comfort, their future prospects, their coming husbands, their capabilities, their utility, and their appropriateness in that place – or inappropriateness.” Trollope’s concern with what he refers to as the “inward nature” of the young women betrays a deep anxiety concerning the effects of white collar work on the essential condition of femininity, a fear that somehow the inherent passivity and innocence of the gentle woman might be corrupted by her work amongst men and machines, or, perhaps more disturbingly, that it might draw out and exacerbate certain tendencies within that same nature, giving fuller reign to the latent fascination with personal secrets, idle gossip, and even promiscuity. Trollope’s concern seems dated today, a quaint reminder of a restrictive morality supposedly superseded. As such, the stories of these women have been largely forgotten, either subsumed to footnotes within the corporate histories of Western Union and AT&T, or, as in the many books that trace the technical innovations and life stories of those archetypal male scientist-hero figures, Bell, Wheatstone, and Morse, simply unnoticed. As we suffer through the peristaltic convulsions of our own “information revolution,” however, historians have been struck by the marked similarities to be found between the communications systems of the nineteenth and early twenty-first centuries – Tom Standage, for example, has called the electrical telegraph “the Victorian Internet” – and with that revived interest has come a welcome attention to the lives of the women who were, as Trollope discovered, its first operators and managers.

Jepsen’s *My Sisters Telegraphic* attempts to fill this gap in labour history by drawing on a rich range of archival resources, ranging from census reports and newspaper coverage of telegraphers’ strikes, to the letters written to professional journals and union newsletters in which women workers engaged in often hotly contested wars of words with their male counterparts. From these sources emerges a detailed picture if not quite of the “inward nature” of women telegraphers, than of their place in the “outward” world of the workplace and society as a whole. Focussing principally on workers in the United States (with occasional but very useful sidelong glances at other nations, including Canada and Mexico), Jepsen describes the entry of women into the white-collar work place in the 1840s, and the relatively quick acceptance of their role in the tele-

graph companies that sprung up in the decades that followed. Drawn by the “genteel” nature of the profession – telegraphy was one of the few options available to middle class women outside of the traditional feminine occupations of teaching and nursing that allowed them to preserve their class status – and to the opportunity to exercise their minds in a profession associated with all that was new and modern in the world, many women were willing to accept the modest wages and often difficult working conditions of the telegraph office. Women were typically paid two thirds to three quarters of what men earned, a practice rationalized by the argument that they were not permanent members of the workforce, as most would leave when married, while the workplace could vary from large, heavily supervised offices in the major cities, to lonely frontier outposts where the sole operator had to handle not only the telegraphy, but to manage all the day to day upkeep and business matters. Even so, the profession remained a popular choice, and as Western Union gradually consolidated its grip on the industry it was able to reduce labour costs by hiring more and more women. Jepsen details the reaction to this process in the book’s best chapters, in which he investigates the rise of trade unionism among the telegraph workers. The initial reluctance of male workers to admit women to their professional associations gradually gave way to full acceptance as it was realized that having the women on the picket lines with them both improved their bargaining position, and reduced the possibility of their being replaced by non-union, and cheaper, female labour. Despite such solidarity, however, telegraphers were defeated in each and every of one of their major job actions between 1870 and 1919, and female unionists bore the brunt of their employer’s wrath. While male employees were usually rehired, many women were discharged for having flouted the paternal bond that was felt to exist between them and the company that had not only trained them, but had been munificent enough to provide a safe working environment and a living wage.

My Sisters Telegraphic provides a valuable service in making so much of the factual information concerning women telegraphers available, and for providing a rich bibliography for future investigators, but one leaves the book feeling that there is much work yet to be done on its topic. This is not a particularly argumentative or analytical work, and Jepsen’s style is often colourless, even when working with the most colourful of materials (the plot summary of Henry James’ *In the Cage* drastically reduces the manifold complexities of this most significant of the literary treatments of the female telegrapher). Moreover, his understanding of the gender economy of the nineteenth century seems largely uninformed by recent work in feminist criticism that has substantially altered our understanding of the doctrine of separate spheres that is assumed as the norm throughout the book. Arguing that “the qualities of a good housekeeper are those of a good telegrapher,” women telegraphers did not so much prove

that “the distinction between the spheres was largely artificial,” as Jepsen claims, as engage in a more subtle and successful strategy, that of appearing to maintain the normative characteristics of femininity (women are good at house-keeping), while covertly recoding the public sphere in such a manner as to permit women a role in it (the telegraph office is simply another version of the domestic home, and hence the appropriateness of women working there). Such lack of sophistication with regard to the workings of gender ideology leads Jepsen to naively conclude that the telegraph allowed women “to step outside of the patriarchal society at will if they so desired” and thus “freed women operators of some of the constraints of a patriarchal society.” “Patriarchy,” however, is not quite as monolithic as Western Union, and there was no simple “stepping outside” of the gender codes in and through which women’s experiences were articulated, as those who found themselves unemployed after daring to join their male workers on the picket line evidently found out.

Venus Green’s *Race on the Line* is, by contrast, a very argumentative book, one that is thoroughly alive not only to the complex and historically variable ways in which the ideological assumptions concerning gender and class structure women’s experience in the workplace, but to the importance of race as a vital constituent in our understanding of labour practises in the period of industrialization. It examines the development of the telephone industry, which eclipsed the telegraph as the instrument of choice for domestic and commercial communications by the First World War. Green offers a case study approach to her topic, focussing on the Bell System (which was later to become AT&T). She argues that the company provides a particularly telling example of the ways in which the new technologies, from handsets to switchboards, were conceived not only as a means of improving service or lowering costs, but of managing its workforce, of increasing profits through decreasing worker autonomy and initiative. Green carefully traces the convergence of gender, race and technology at Bell, structuring each of her three large sections around the introduction of new classes of instruments, and tracing the ways in which they altered the work of its female employees. In the first section, covering the period 1878-1920, the rise of the Bell System and its struggles to eliminate the independent telephone companies that sought to provide service to regional customers, is detailed in relation to switchboard development and the concomitant feminization of the workplace. While improvements in technology allowed the company to reduce the number of operators it required, there remained a need for the “personal touch” that women were felt to offer, and thus the image of the “white lady” operator was born. Despite working conditions that had much more in common with factory workers, operators were styled as genteel, polite, and, above all, deferential. At a time when instruments and lines were often faulty, “the voice with a smile,” as early promotional materials would have it, was a necessary

part of the public's acceptance of the new device, and Bell was quick to acknowledge the importance of its female employees.

The image of the "white lady" operator, however, was premised on the exclusion of women of colour. Green provides an exceptionally well researched account, not only of the corporate hiring policies that maintained the racist association of technical skill with skin colour, but of the cultural ideology that prompted many white women to actively identify with and maintain the "white lady" facade. While enjoying the social prestige that went with the image, they saw no contradiction between it and an increasingly militant trade unionism that escalated sharply when the US government nationalized the service during the First World War. Green argues, however, that it was this very identification with the cultural ideal of bourgeois femininity that ultimately betrayed women operators, leading them to distrust their own leadership skills, and to subordinate their demands for workplace reform to the craft ideology of their male co-workers, which favoured limits on working hours and increased pay. As with the telegraphists' strikes that Jepsen records, telephone operators saw their various attempts to reform their working conditions thwarted by a management policy devoted to victory at all costs.

As the dial era, the subject of Green's second section, gave way to computerization, the image of the "white lady" to which female workers had clung proved no shield against the social changes wrought by the civil rights movement and Bell's desire to reduce costs through technological innovation. Women of colour had sought employment in the telephone industry since its inception (Green has unearthed some wonderful photos, for example, of Asian women working the "Chinese Exchange" in San Francisco in the 1930s), but the company had resisted a series of challenges to its employment practices, often shifting the blame for its exclusionary hiring to its female operators, arguing that they refused to work with African Americans and Hispanics. It was only in the late 1960s that this situation began to change, as Bell's monopoly of the telephone industry allowed it to dispense with the need for the "personal touch" of the "white lady." While other companies were busily moving their operations to the suburbs, Bell maintained its offices in large metropolitan centres, discovering not only opportunities to expand its service to the increasingly affluent African American city dwellers, but a ready source of cheap labour. The result of the successful integration of people of colour into the telephone industry was bought at price, however. As Green is careful to point out in the book's final chapters, Bell used the threat of racial integration as a weapon against its white employees, affording it time to introduce the very technologies that would largely make their jobs redundant. What had been, especially in the early days of the industry, an occupation that provided employees with a living wage, and opportunities to use their initiative, had become, by the time that

African Americans began to be hired in significant numbers, a low paying, thoroughly industrialized occupation, in which the operator's voice was no longer required to smile, as it was often no longer required at all. The company's enlightened "affirmative action" program, Green concludes, was little more than a means of gaining greater control over its workforce and to further reduce costs through automation.

Race on the Line is in many ways a model of what a politically informed and carefully researched work of labour history can be. It provides an astute analysis of the struggles of women operators to control the conditions of their employment, and the ways in which their identification as white women was used against them, even as it served to limit the employment opportunities of women of colour. The choice of the Bell Systems as a case study is felicitous (Green was employed there herself and it was that experience that prompted the book), as it provides a sharp sense of focus, while affording many opportunities to draw larger conclusions from its example about the relationship between race, gender, and technology in the workplace. If it might take something from *My Sister's Telegraphic*, however, it would be Jepsen's attention to the ways in which the telephone and its female operators were represented in the mass media of the period. Given that much of the book turns on the ways in which women workers identified with the phantasmatic ideal of the "white lady," some greater understanding of how this image was produced and maintained, not only in Bell's own promotional literature, but in the illustrated advertisements, newspapers, magazines, plays, novels, and films of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries seems necessary. The writers and filmmakers of the period maintained a cultural obsession with the lives and stories of female telephone operators equal to that of Trollope's concern for the women of the Central Telegraph Office. Placing the efforts of female telephone operators in such a context would reveal the degree to which a concept like "whiteness" was itself a technology, an instrument developed not only in the Bell labs, but by the society of which they were a part. Attending to the ways in which women workers's relationship to race and gender was mediated in and through the cultural imaginary would reveal the degree to which their struggles to control the workplace were also struggles with the images, symbols, and words in which their experiences were constituted.

Christopher Keep
University of Western Ontario