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beyond brutal passions: prostitution in early nineteenth-century

Montreal

Mary Ann Poutanen, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2015, 432pp., ISBN: 978-0-7735-4533-5, \$110.00 CAD (Hbk)/ISBN: 978-0-7735-4534-2, \$34.95 CAD (Pbk)

Sex work. Sex trade. Sex trafficking. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, these terms have come to define commercialised sexual transactions. Developed through feminist political interventions, this lexicon has transformed prostitution from a moral question into a matter of human rights. The women and girls (and some males) in the trade are the slaves of today, whose rights traffickers abuse; or sex work is simply a means to make money in a market economy. By following best practice in health and safety, adult women have the right to conduct business as sole traders or as employers and employees in larger enterprises.

In what respects does this rights-oriented discourse conform to or differ from past ways of understanding sexual commerce? What economic, demographic, social, political and legal factors informed providers' decisions to sell sex? What were the consequences of sexual transactions for the various parties involved?

Mary Anne Poutanen addresses these questions in her deeply researched study of prostitution in early nineteenth-century Montreal, when the city was a commercial hub, populated primarily by French and English inhabitants with Irish immigrants arriving in great numbers in the 1830s. Poutanen eschews the framework of victimhood. Yes, the Church, both Catholic and Protestant, condemned them; they were rounded up by the police; they were scorned and punished by legal authorities and urban reformers. However, women who engaged in commercial sex responded rationally to the economic pressures and the limited alternatives the city provided to support themselves and their kin. Poutanen's prostitutes were embattled battlers, acting out agency and its limitations in a tough city with even tougher winters.

The archival evidence required to chart prostitutes' experiences and contextualise their struggles remains, fortunately, in Montreal's police and court records and its newspapers. Poutanen goes much further, digging into census and parish records and evidence produced by magdalen asylums, courts and prisons that dealt with 'profligate' women. Poutanen discerns in this chorus of condemnation 'an ideological view of gender, class, race, ethnicity and sexuality born of a moral discourse that [cast] aspersions on labouring or popular-class women' (p. 6). Importantly, she includes labouring men in this list, whom social elites targeted as well in an effort to purge the city of its 'brutal passions'. The neighbours of prostitutes and the neighbourhoods of streetwalkers and brothel operators are also prominent players in this study, and Poutanen shows how their hostility towards the trade was mixed with toleration and collusion.

There are two respects in which this powerfully argued work significantly enriches established understandings of prostitution's history. First, it anchors claims of women's agency in legal

records that show women taking customers and neighbours to court and defending themselves against charges of vagrancy and disorderliness. Imprisoned women were criminalised, but they also took advantage of medical services. Divided into two parts, the book begins with the world of sex workers, their customers, their neighbours and the changing conditions under which prostitution took shape between the 1810s and 1840s. Then it moves to the section titled 'Between Law and Custom', which examines the trade's regulation. The four chapters in this section prove that women were not simply swept up in a hostile and unforgiving criminal justice system. Poutanen plumbs the rich archive of police court, petty sessions and quarter session records and comes up with vivid stories of women taking action on their own behalf, not cowing before their captives and judges, either legal or moral.

The book's second key contribution is its empirical grounding in urban history. Too often histories of prostitution heavy on theory identify regulatory regimes and spaces of regulation at the expense of focussing on the people and places involved. Montreal was a city sliced into francophone and anglophone sectors, Irish immigrant quarters and sites where potential customers clustered—markets, barracks, docks. Excellent maps (pp. 66–68) depict the changing geography of arrests for streetwalking and brothels, making both the selling of sex and its policing visible in ways not accessible to contemporaries. Prostitution was 'ubiquitous' in the early nineteenth-century city; yet, Poutanen (p. 315) shows it was 'not uniform', neither spatially nor in regard to its meanings for the wide array of individuals and agencies engaged in the practice and its regulation. As much as the trade and its regulation altered over this period of flux, the motivating factors persisted.

Beyond Brutal Passions, a contribution to the press's list on the history of Quebec, pays a little too much respect to the international literature that informs its analysis, at times undercutting its originality. Indeed, the breadth and depth of Poutanen's research should set a benchmark for other historians of commercial sex, its practice and legal regulation. Above all, the author's sensitivity towards the historical actors involved in the trade—the women, but also the customers, the police, the judges, jurors and jail keepers—is social history at its best.

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