

family to farm production oriented more to the market. For this reason, women's participation in Canadian development is not incidental but integral to economic rationalization and early labour organization. Indeed, the early women's rights movements in Ontario benefitted from the active presence of women in the economy and gave them a large constituency to draw on.

Of course, there were counter tendencies that worked against women's emancipation. Cohen is at her best in examining women's rights and male property rights in Tory Ontario. In a fascinating analysis, she shows that neither custom nor law at this time regarded the family as an equalitarian unit that shared the family assets in common. Control of property was in male hands alone. Patriarchy dominated the division of labour from its pre-capitalist origins. A woman had no legal rights to what was produced despite the fact that her labour was critical to the family's well-being. Everything was under her husband's control including the children, the family property and, most critically, her own labour. In the often-repeated words of William Blackstone, the eminent British jurist, in the eyes of the law "husband and wife are one and that one is the husband." Thanks to this splendid book, we understand in a deeper way how difficult it is to strike down gender inequality in the market and in the family structure.

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### **SEALSKIN AND SHODDY: Working Women in American Labor Press Fiction, 1870-1920**

Ann Schofield, ed. *Contributions in Women's Studies*, Number 96. New York: Greenwood Press, 1988.

#### **Linda Kealey**

The North American labour press of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tried to attract readers not only through its news and editorial coverage, but also through fiction. Schofield's collection, culled from a broad selection of labour papers, stretches from the Knights of Labor in the 1880s through the American Federation of Labor in the early part of the century, with a slight nod toward the Industrial Workers of the World in one

piece of fiction. Her brief introduction contextualizes the stories and discusses the relationship of such fiction to labour history and women's history and suggests what such stories can tell us about popular understandings of literary forms. As the editor notes, the authors are by and large representative of large unions with female rank and file and few are workers themselves. While reflecting themes dominant among working-class women and men, their purpose is prescriptive, that is, aimed at shaping working women's responses to industrialization and the changing social conditions of women's work.

More than half the volume is devoted to a reprint of W. H. Little's *Knights of Labor* novel which provides the title to this volume. While the story follows the conventions of nineteenth century sentimental fiction, it also conveys the flavour of the knights' social philosophy, a philosophy described in detail in Susan Levine's study, *Labor's True Woman* (Philadelphia, 1984). Schofield's interpretation of this social philosophy unfortunately stresses the older view of the Knights as reform oriented and non-confrontational, a view that has been revised by recent literature on the Knights. While the fictional heroine of this story is a middle-class daughter of an industrialist who takes on the identity of a sewing girl and later helps to organize the sewing women into a protective association, the literary portrait of these working women tends to downplay working women's own initiatives in the labour movement; nevertheless, the fictional portrayal of factory life, particularly among women in the clothing trades, does suggest the realities of low wages and exploitation as well as the potential for resistance among women workers. More importantly, this novel, like many of the other briefer stories, suggests the tensions between femininity and waged labour which so preoccupied both social reformers and working people themselves in this period. The heroine, Mamie Symington, also challenges the boundaries of middle-class womanhood by taking an active role in challenging the grinding exploitation of the sewing women, albeit with the help of the handsome, university educated young man Mamie eventually marries. It is young Hal Hinston after all who draws up the constitution for the protective association,

thus underlining the accepted notion that women, even relatively liberated ones, were dependent on men and accepted male authority.

The message that women could be feminine and work for a living in dignity, despite obstacles, was an important one in the context of social ambivalence about the value and propriety of women's waged labour. Many of the stories in this volume point to the dangers inherent in low-waged work, particularly the temptation to immorality and prostitution. Indeed the only fiction from an IWW journal, "Mary Shaughnessy," portrays the inevitable downfall of a shop girl ground down by long hours and low wages and easily seduced and abandoned by the shopowner's son. Nevertheless, many of the other stories also stress that being a working woman might also lead to a sense of collectivity and resistance. For example, in "The Apple," a young girl employed in a sweat shop sewing garments was discovered by the boss to be eating the fruit while sewing; snatching the apple from her he indignantly threw it in the waste basket. Next day all 40 women workers put down their work and each took out an apple at the appointed hour and began eating, to the astonishment of the boss and his foreman. The apple became the symbol of resistance to the male bosses and catalyzed a new spirit among the formerly hopeless women workers. The apple, as symbol of resistance, also suggests a reading which recasts more basic imagery, particularly of Eve and her role as temptress in the creation myth.

Some of the stories in this collection were written by prominent ILGWU organizer, Gertrude Barnum, who used fiction to suggest that unionization would improve the wages and working conditions of women workers. "This Style: Six Twenty-Nine" relates the story of a dissatisfied hat trimmer who bemoans the acquiescence of her co-workers in their own drudgery while pausing with a friend in front of a store window mannequin labeled "This Style \$6.29." Upon attending a meeting of the Hat Trimmers' Union, the heroine discovers "a class of girls who do not wait for others to tag them with a price... a class of girls with will-power behind their pink cheeks who can open their mouths and put a price on themselves, and a good price, too" through their union. Barnum's skeptical heroine

decides to organize her co-workers in the upbeat ending of the story. "At the Shirt-waist Factory" recounts a similar theme: women stitchers eating lunch at the factory spend their time reading novels and dream books or listening to a co-worker explain Marxism, rather than using their collective strength to achieve change. The story's impatient heroine delivers an object lesson to her colleagues when she persuades the novel-reader to come with her to a manager's office where she demands the employment of a second "checker" to speed up the punching of the time cards; on behalf of her 250 sister workers, the heroine stands up to the manager and wins, thus conveying the message that female helplessness and romantic notions of male chivalry are no substitute for straightforward, business-like negotiations.

As the editor notes, these stories do not lend themselves to any one clear-cut interpretation; some stress women's secondary status in the labour market and most do not dispute the importance of marriage and family for women workers. A few portray women as active in shaping their own destinies, particularly through labour organization. All the stories convey some sense of the tensions between waged work and femininity and offer readers a chance to reflect on their own life situations. As historical fiction these stories do not always clearly reflect the realities of the labour market for women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, nor were they meant to. They were written to convey various ideological messages to readers and reflect their authors' visions of the social relations between the classes and between the sexes. As a reader, I would have liked more reflection from the editor on the authors themselves; few are clearly identified or placed in any context. If we are to understand the stories and their potential impact, we need to have some discussion of the authors' ideological underpinnings and assumptions. Did male authors portray women workers differently than women authors? From this collection it seems they did, with some of the women authors granting women workers more potential for activism. The selection of the stories is also critical; what criteria did the editor use for choosing these particular stories? While they roughly reflect the views of the K of L, the IWW and the AF of L, the editor's

interpretation of these groups leads the reader to think that the more radical labour organizations offered less potential to women workers than the American Federation of Labor, an ironic conclusion given the recognized reluctance of this organization to commit its resources to unionizing women.

What this suggests is the need for a more careful selection and reading of the fiction, as well as a more detailed comparison between the fictional representations and the historical realities of labour organizations. Fiction, after all, is not a simple mirror reflection of social attitudes and behaviour, but rather encodes meanings that authors create. With more knowledge about the particular authors who wrote the stories the reader could better assess those meanings and place them in the appropriate historical context of class, ethnicity and gender, conceptual frameworks which aid in the understanding not only of history, but of fiction as well.

## ON THE GOLDEN PORCH

Tatyana Tolstaya. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1989. (Translated by Antonina W. Bouis.)

### *Anna Matzov*

This collection of stories was first published in Russian only two years ago. Reading Tatyana Tolstaya's stories in the original language makes one curious how the translator will manage to convey her style to the foreign reader, since so much



of the humour and her ironic tone employ the special features of the Russian language itself. Although much of it is lost in the translation, and some witty references to Russian literature and culture will possibly be missed by the English reader, this collection of stories still manages to capture the reader and land him/her in an animated world where summer comes "laughing and rumbling, waving a motley flag," and "the blue plate of self-important kasha" is "so pleased with itself;" depression takes you by the hand and sits with you for hours "holding hands," and time moves in more than one direction. Complaint is replaced by laughter, boredom is avoided by constant surprise of the unpredictable; and with this formula the differences cease to exist between men and women, Tolstaya's country and the rest of the world. One is just delighted to follow her into the land where fantasy and reality balance together in an atmosphere of sunlight even when it is a "rainy day" in the story. Thus, in Tolstaya's world the two modes of existence, the imaginary and the realistic, are both legitimate partners of one reality.

Although the stories are placed in contemporary Russia, they do not reflect any of the major political or historical issues of today. There is also nothing in them about problems of motherhood, working women, family difficulties or other issues Soviet women authors write about. Although there are a few contemporary details like contact lenses, artificial lashes, plastic ear-rings, and communal apartments, these do not play a major role in the plot, and most of the stories could convey the same message coming from a different era.

With a sensitive grasp of human psychology, resorting to humour rather than preaching, to myth and allegory rather than rhetoric, Tolstaya exposes different cultural clichés in a very entertaining and original manner. Seen from outside and not from within there are no rounded characters and most stories are structured around a single obsession which dominates the character's life: a dream of finding a lost mother ("Sweet Dreams, Son"), or a belief that happiness in a woman's life depends on obtaining an extra bedroom ("Fire and Dust"). Yet the creative associations, abrupt transitions and ironic style manage to create the illusion of a densely populated and vibrant three-di-