

BEYOND BRUTAL PASSIONS: PROSTITUTION IN EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY MONTREAL

by Mary Anne Poutanen, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, July 2015): 432 pp. Paperback ISBN 9780773545342

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An increasingly common observation advanced about the state of professional, scholarly historical analysis is that long-standing popular areas of analytical and empirical inquiry, most notably political history and diplomatic history, are decisively on the wane. Seemingly fewer curricular offerings are available in academic departments, a shrinking number of graduate students are opting to commit to these intellectual pursuits, and the research agenda and scholarly output of professors are tilted less and less toward the examination of political processes, and the foreign relations of actors in the international system. Social history, with a distinct non-elite, non-institutional focus has, for all intents and purposes, come to dominate the field – regardless of place and time. With an acute sensitivity (and at times purposely driven by a normative research design) toward revealing and repatriating marginal or “lost” elements of past societal experiences, the pursuit of social history has considerably enhanced our understanding of individuals, groups, classes, geographic domains, and historical forces. Exemplary studies grounded in social history that have been produced on Quebec, sharing a general commitment or diagnostic preoccupation to “drill down” and produce a fuller understanding of often overlooked yet significant forces that have shaped the historical direction of the province, have been commonplace in the scholarly literature over the past twenty-five years.

Joining this list – in what must be regarded as an exceptionally well researched, meaningful inquiry – is Mary Anne Poutanen's work, *Beyond Brutal Passions: Prostitution in Early Nineteenth-Century Montreal*. Published as part of the Studies on the History of Quebec series by McGill-Queen's University Press, the author's focus, grounded in the years 1810–1842, is a penetrating and detailed examination of heterosexual prostitution in Montreal in the first half of the 19th century.

What specifically does this historical investigation illuminate for us, and how does it contribute to our understanding of Quebec society? In short, Poutanen's careful analysis reveals a nuanced, richly textured understanding of the peoples and places that sex commerce unfolded in Montreal. Demographically, the author argues that sex workers – who, in opting for a life of prostitution (often for short periods), did so for many economic, social, and sexual reasons – of this period were foremost marked by their diversity, having both rural and urban roots and representing several nationalities. As members of Montreal's society, they were not per se – as one might imagine – marginalized citizens. We learn that they “shared neighbourhoods with peoples of different social classes, ethnicities, and religious denominations,” all the while affording themselves use of the very same public social spaces available to all Montrealers. Geographically, while certain areas of the rapidly burgeoning city were most closely identified as red-light districts, the historical record, Poutanen demonstrates, shows that “prostitution was ubiquitous on the urban landscape.” Streetwalkers, residential-based prostitution, and brothel keepers engaged in sex commerce could be found throughout the social geography of the city.

Beyond Brutal Passions is not content, however, in providing readers with a historical narrative grounded in the social practices, demographic and geographic markers of sex commerce in Montreal; the book is equally committed to an absorbing examination of the complex legal, political, and social intercourse between plaintiffs who sought to prosecute alleged sex workers, accused individuals, and the prevailing criminal justice system (i.e., policemen, attorneys, and magistrates) in effect in Montreal in early to mid-nineteenth century Montreal. This invaluable historical inquiry by Poutanen persuasively demonstrates the labyrinth of forces that prostitutes had to grapple with on a daily basis; a labyrinth which ironically was embraced at times by sex workers (as a source for shelter, food, and medical care), but was also conspicuously capricious in its subjective and uneven administration of justice. Women serving as streetwalkers who were the subject of legal actions and found guilty, we learn, were almost uniformly administered a prison sentence. Punishment for prostitutes, the author suggests, shifted over time between the poles of punishment (to include public humiliation or shaming rituals, banishment, subjected to the pillory or to carting, or increasingly, physical incarceration in a prison) and rehabilitation.

In an effort to chronicle, discuss and situate the role of prostitution in early to mid-nineteenth century Montreal, *Beyond Brutal Passions* advances a comprehensive, engaging, and persuasive narrative. Mary Anne Poutanen has produced a first-rate work of original scholarship

that contributes to and expands, in meaningful ways, our collective understanding of Quebec history. Far from being individuals who “polluted society” in Montreal, these women proved to be engaged and meaningful actors in Quebec’s private and public spheres; as sex practitioners, this volume commendably asserts “their rightful place as active agents in Montreal’s history.”