2010

Book Review of *Heavy Burdens on Small Shoulders: The Labour of Pioneer Children on the Canadian Prairies* by Sandra Rollings-Magnusson

Bob Barnetson

*Athabasca University*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch)

Part of the [American Studies Commons](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch)

---


[http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/1138](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/1138)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

The contribution of pioneer children (aged 4–16) to the economic survival of Canadian prairie farms is little known. Heavy Burdens examines the self-reported labor of 260 children in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba between 1871 and 1913. A typology of labor (subcategorized by age and gender) helpfully structures the narrative data used to flesh out this work. The importance and invisibility of child labor during the settlement of the West broadly mirrors that of women.

The five core chapters of the book examine children’s work in establishing farms, commodity production, waged labor, domestic tasks, and household subsistence activities. Each chapter examines the prevalence of such activity by children, including age and gender breakdowns of reports. The nature and value of such tasks are considered through extremely readable excerpting and summarizing of first-hand accounts. It is difficult to convey how truly engaging this approach is—the work, its circumstance, meaning, and effect are vivid and poignant.

The necessity of child labor is clearly documented, reflecting that the benefits of agriculture largely accrued to capital and the state, rather than farmers. Children provided readily available workers who reduced the need for waged workers during this period of labor-intensive farming and whose labor surplus was usually appropriated by their fathers. In this manner, children’s position was broadly similar to that of women, although this parallel is not particularly well developed. Such work was socially legitimized by immediate necessity and an expectation that such skills and work ethic were proper preparation for adulthood.

The book’s essential value is in clarifying the extent and worth of child agricultural labor and, secondarily, the role of children in the pioneer family. Yet it also sheds useful light on modern policy debates. For example, contemporary child agricultural labor in Alberta is unregulated, exposing farm children to occupational risks deemed unacceptable to urban children. Heavy Burdens helps explain the historical roots of this regulatory lacuna (i.e., financial necessity). It opens up the commonplace belief that agricultural labor is good for children to a more nuanced examination of the costs and benefits of child agricultural labor and to whom they accrue.

Pedagogically, the book is accessible to undergraduates and provides a useful introduction to both frontier life and the way in which families adapt to the demands of economic systems. Heavy Burdens also provides a useful broadening of the literature on child labor during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which tends to focus on resource extraction and domestic work in eastern and central Canada. That said, a bit more connection to this literature would have provided greater context in which to understand the work of children in this era. Bob Barnetson, Centre for Work and Community Studies, Athabasca University.