

1-1-2009

Review of *Working Girls in the West: Representations of Wage-Earning Women*. By Lindsey McMaster

Judy Fudge
University of Victoria

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Fudge, Judy, "Review of *Working Girls in the West: Representations of Wage-Earning Women*. By Lindsey McMaster" (2009). *Great Plains Quarterly*. Paper 1215.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1215>

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 Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Working Girls in the West: Representations of Wage-Earning Women. By Lindsey McMaster. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008. x + 209 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. C\$85.00 cloth, C\$32.95 paper.

Lindsey McMaster provides a lively account of how the working girl was “imagined, represented, and constructed as a figure within the cultural narratives of Canada, the West, and the empire” during the period of rapid economic growth and profound social transformation from the late 1800s to the early 1920s. She examines a range of different types of texts—newspaper reports, reform and social-purity discourse, official reports on labor, women’s travel accounts of Canada, and Canadian literature and poetry—for common themes and tropes. Her goal is to see how social narratives of the working girl in the West, that vast imaginary from the Great Plains to the West Coast, took hold. Her claim is that the working girl in the West was the repository of a range of social anxieties about the pace and effects of change. She deftly shows how industrialization and urbanization combined with ideologies of racial and moral purity to create a terrain over which young working women challenged their traditional gender roles.

Working Girls in the West is divided into five chapters framed by a short introduction and a short conclusion. The introduction sets out the scope of the book and provides a backdrop of demographics and labor market statistics. McMaster is specifically interested in “stories that featured the working girl and made sense of her role through narrative elements like plot, dramatic conflict, romance and moral endings.” She focuses on Vancouver, and each chapter is devoted to a specific narrative. The first explores the ways in which white women were represented as desirable civilizing agents in the colonial West. She places bride ships and domestic service in the larger context of industrialism and urbanization in order to illustrate the anxieties induced by working girls’ single status. Chapter two focuses on literary representations of working girls. McMaster explores five texts—one poem, one book of stories, and three novels, which are either issue-oriented

social realism or melodramatic romance—that narrate the trials and joys of the working girl.

The next three chapters focus on recurring narratives within the broader depiction of the working girl in the West—prostitution, strikes and labor activism, and the mixed-race workplace. In chapter 3, McMaster's account of the social reform movement's emphasis on moral purity and white slavery, on the one hand, and feeble-mindedness and delinquency on the other, is relieved by excerpts from the autobiography of Madeleine Blair, a turn-of-the-century prostitute and "Madame." Chapter 4 recounts two strikes, one in Vancouver and the other in Winnipeg, that involved women workers and important women labor activists. Using newspaper accounts to reconstruct the strikes, McMaster notes the extreme variance in the accounts and the representation of women's strike activities in different papers. Chapter 5 focuses on the mixed-race workplace and the legislation that prohibited Chinese men from employing white women. The central narrative is Jane Smith's death in 1924; Smith, a white domestic worker, was murdered in an upscale Vancouver home, and suspicions fell on her Asian co-worker. The white slave narrative reappears, and white working women are portrayed as especially vulnerable to racial contamination. Once again the tendency was to magnify moral concerns and overlook practical matters.

McMaster concludes that when the working girl entered the workplace she stepped into a whirlwind of contradictions that foreshadowed women's changing roles in the twentieth century.

JUDY FUDGE
Faculty of Law
University of Victoria