

REPRESENTING WOMEN WORKERS DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR, GENDER AND REPRESENTATION

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When Canada entered the Second World War in 1939, there were, according to Jennifer Anne Stephen, 600 000 women workers, largely employed in the domestic services sector. By 1943, because of the many men at war 1.2 million women workers were mobilized to work in a myriad of industries, including manufacturing, transportation, communications, finance, and construction.¹ Female participation in the Canadian workforce was of crucial significance during World War II. Moreover, the new role of women workers outside the home led to the development of women's rights in Canadian society. In 1943, the National Council of Women's public outcry led to an increase of working wages of up to 80% and to allowances for dependents of servicewomen.² During the Second World War Canadian middle class women suddenly acquired a new social role by entering the industrial work force in unprecedented numbers. As a reflection of a growing social change in Canada and encouraging women to enlist as war workers on the home front, the Canadian government commissioned photographers and war artists to portray women at work in industries previously regarded as the near exclusive domain of men.³ This virtual exhibition of images and drawings by Pearl Sammett, Harry Rowed, Richard Wright, and Molly Lamb Bobak reveal how the female working subject was portrayed. There is a clear distinction of female portrayal in comparison to images of men workers, which either attempts to maintain a stereotype of the conventional female or boldly demonstrates her new identity as a female worker.

These images visualize what Jennifer Anne Stephen argues in her book, *Pick One Intelligent Girl: Employability, Domesticity and Gendering in Canada's Welfare State, 1939-1947*, pertaining government policy, women's work and the war effort: "Whatever their views on the question of women's right to work, they were determined to demonstrate that female labour was as viable, productive, and reliable as that of the traditional breadwinner."⁴

Pearl Sammett (n.d.) was one of the few female photographers during the Second World War whose rare photographs of female workers are part of the Library and Archives Canada's National Film Board (NFB) photographic collections.⁵ During WWII, the NFB developed a new branch, the Bureau of Public Information, as a means to "collect and disseminate information about Canada's war effort."⁶ While Sammett had succeeded to become a photographer in a male-dominated industry, not much information has survived about her, apart from her visual contribution to the agency, which can perhaps testify to her social status in the general field of photography.



Two female laboratory workers test synthetic rubber in the Polymer Rubber Corporation plant, January 1944

Pearl Sammett. (n.d.)

Negative Film B/W - cellulose nitrate.

National Film Board of Canada.

Library and Archives Canada. / c. 3196988.

[http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.d](http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3196988)

[isplayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3196988](http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3196988) add link

This photograph portrays two women at the Polymer Rubber Corporation laboratory, testing chemicals used in synthetic rubber manufacture. Sammett captures the women in the center of their working environment yet, they are represented behind a metal structure, as though barred off and enclosed in their own working space. It is noteworthy that when these photographs were taken, women had only recently entered the work force. The portrait of a female enclosure is perhaps an attempt to emphasize that this industrial space is still a protected sphere where women are performing activities reminiscent of kitchen work.⁷



Enid Challen of Galt, Ont. (left) and Betty Kane of Woodstock, Ont. testing chemicals used in synthetic rubber manufacture at the laboratories of the Polymer Rubber Corporation, Sarnia, Ontario, October 1943.

Pearl Sammett

Negative Film B/W - cellulose nitrate

National Film Board of Canada. Library and Archives Canada. c3197140

http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3627286

Sammett's portraits of women workers are at times more intimate, compared to the work of other male photographers, as if to suggest a common bond. Here, in portraying the same women at the Polymer Rubber Corporation, she chooses to position herself physically closer to her subjects. She crosses the metallic obstacle to enter this female space and over the table records the serious and attentive faces of these women even more closely.



Norman Dowdell and Donald White delivering wood from the Municipal woodyard to Perth, Ontario residents, Spring 1943. Pearl Sammett
Negative Film B/W - cellulose nitrate
National Film Board of Canada. Library and Archives Canada. c3197840
http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/public_mikan/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3197840&rec_nbr_list=3197840



Three unidentified male residents of Perth, Ontario, cutting their supply of wood for the winter, September 1943

Pearl Sammett

Negative Film B/W - cellulose nitrate

National Film Board of Canada.

Library and Archives Canada. c3197839

[http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.d
isplayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3197839](http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3197839)

Unquestionably, during the war years there was a difference between the portraits of women and men at work. These two photographs by Pearl Sammett capture action shots of men at work. In her treatment of these male workers Sammett is not concerned in capturing the look of the faces but rather focuses on the physical dexterity of these men in action. Perhaps as a woman photographer Sammett is keenly interested in the individuality of her female subjects, whereas she views these men with their backs to the viewer as representative of the commonplace identity of a male work force.

Harry Newton Rowed (1907-?) is a Canadian photographer who has spent a lifetime documenting workers and laborers, notably for the Bureau of Public Information and the National Film Board during wartime, and later as part of his own personal business. His earlier works commissioned by the Bureau of Public Information are especially notable in regards to Canadian female workers during World War II.⁸ His collection of photographs at the Library and Archives Canada includes over 900 images that record a more extensive view of female workers' lives. These photographs document both the working environment and daily routines of these women. A closer look at his photographs reveals these two distinct categories of imagery.



Woman worker operates a machine at the Dominion Arsenals Ltd. plant in front of a statue of the Sacred Heart, Quebec, Qc, 24 August 1942

Harry Rowed

Negative Film, Black and White

National Film Board of Canada. Library and Archives Canada. c 3196118.

http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/public_mikan/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3196118&rec_nbr_list=3196118

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The first category of Rowed's photographs consists mainly of powerful and busy workingwomen, performing heavy industrial work. In this photograph the woman operating a machine at Dominion Arsenals Ltd. plant sits in front of a statue of the Sacred Heart. The photograph was originally accompanied by a caption that read: "GIRLS AT DOMINION ARSENALS PLANT, QUEBEC - August 1942. A statute of the Sacred Heart has been placed in each hall of the plant. Girl in this picture is Jeanne d'Arc Saint-Don, 20." Here, we see an image encrypted with symbolism: a woman, a huge machine, and a Jesus figure suspended from the wall, above her head. The low vantage point of the photograph contributes to the idea that both photographer and viewer in looking up to the woman are glorifying her in action while alluding to her own faithful and devout qualities.



Women workers stitch service uniforms using sewing machines at the Great Western Garment Co, Edmonton, AB, 16 Apr. 1942.

Harry Rowed

Negative Film Black and White

National Film Board of Canada.

Library and Archives Canada. c 3597745.

http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=000003597745



Women workers amongst a pile of army service uniforms check them for size at the Great Western Garment Co., Edmonton, AB, 16 April 1942

Harry Rowed

Negative Film Black and White

National Film Board of Canada. Library and Archives Canada. c 3597740.

[http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.d
isplayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=000003597740](http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=000003597740)

In the same vein as the female worker intently operating a machine, two group portraits also show women focused on their work. Most apparent in these images is an unmistakable sense of camaraderie and good spirit. One of the women appears to be smiling as she works, likely aware of being photographed. These pictures are more closely aligned to the women's subsidiary role in assisting their men at war, as they are shown in the process of making military uniforms—an activity illustrating a more traditional women's work.



Laurette Maurice, female munitions worker at the Dominion Arsenals Ltd. plant, enjoys a day sun-tanning, Québec, Qc, 24 August 1942

Harry Rowed

Negative Film Black and White

National Film Board of Canada. Library and Archives Canada. c 3196138.

http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3196138&back_url=%28&back_url=%28%29



Roberte, Hélène and Celine Perry, employees of the Dominion Arsenals munitions plant, visit the Québec City on the observation tram, Québec, Qc, 24 August 1942

Harry Rowed

Negative Film Black and White. National Film Board of Canada

Library and Archives Canada / c 3192558.

http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayEcopies&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3192558&title=Roberte%2C+H%C3%A9l%C3%A8ne+and+Celine+Perry%2C+employees+of+the+Dominion+Arsenals+munitions+plant%2C+visit+the+Qu%C3%A9bec+City+on+the+observation+tram.+&ecopy=e000760834&back_url=%28%29



Women munitions workers enjoy a lunch-time walk with friends at the Dominion Arsenals Ltd. Plant, Québec, Qc, 24 August 1942

Harry Rowed

Negative Film Black and White

CollectionsCanada.gc.ca. National Film Board of Canada

Library and Archives Canada. c 3196148.

http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3193607&back_url=%28%29

The second category of Harry Rowed's photographs consists of female workers who are labeled as "workers" or "employees" of some manufacturing company such as the Dominion Arsenal, included here, however they picture little or nothing about the women to suggest they are actually at work. Laurette Maurice, for instance, enjoys the day sun tanning although she is labeled "working woman." She is represented in a playful and joyful manner, deliberately posing for the photographer. The photographs in this series appear to attest to women's happiness in their newfound independence.

Rowed's portrait photographs display a rich variety of female workers. On one hand, the female is an intelligent, hard-working, devout and faithful subject; while on the other, she is playful, happy and independent, basking in newfound independence. The emphasis on women's sexuality is noteworthy, almost as though alluding to the popular pinup images of that era.



Women loggers smoking cigarettes on a break, Queen Charlotte Islands, B.C.
Apr. 1943

Richard Wright,

Negative Film Black and White

National Film Board of Canada.

Library and Archives Canada. c 3196781

[http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.d
isplayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=000003196781](http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=000003196781)

Signatures and inscriptions: "LUMBERING. With more than 1,000,000 square miles of timber land, Canada ranks third in the world as a producer of wood, and lumbering is a major industry. Lumbermills in the forests of the Queen Charlotte Island, off the coast of B.C., work alongside professional lumbermen as timekeepers, supervisors, and mill workers; others ride the booms, handling the timber like veterans. Here, the girls..."



Women shipbuilders working on a ship in a Vancouver shipyard, Vancouver, B.C., June 1943.

Richard Wright. (n.d.)

Negative Film Black and White.

National Film Board of Canada. Library and Archives Canada. c 3196667.

<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/lac->

[bac/results/images?form=images_simple&lang=eng&startRecord=1&sortBy=score+desc&digitalContentInd=1&query=Women+shipbuilders+working+on+a+ship+in+a+Vancouver+shipyard%2C+Vancouver&mediaType=](http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/lac-bac/results/images?form=images_simple&lang=eng&startRecord=1&sortBy=score+desc&digitalContentInd=1&query=Women+shipbuilders+working+on+a+ship+in+a+Vancouver+shipyard%2C+Vancouver&mediaType=)

Signatures and inscriptions: "WOMEN SHIPBUILDERS, VANCOUVER, B.C. - JUNE 1943. Women from every walk of life - beauticians, nurses, dietitians and stenos - have given up peacetime pursuits and taken vital war jobs in the shipyards of British Columbia to relieve the manpower shortage. Photo shows Verna Rennie, former nurse (top) and Mollie McPherson measuring cowl vent fitting."

Richard Wright (n.d.) was a free-lance photographer of the National Film Board's Still Photography Division who documented female labourers of the British Columbia area, during WWII. His portrait photographs are dramatically different from those of Harry Rowed or Pearl Sammett in that he portrays his female subjects in a distinctly masculine manner. The women are either represented in the act of performing, or resting from outdoor hard labor. Three women on a break are in noticeably manly positions. In fact, there is nothing in the physical appearance or pose of these women—except for the hairstyle and the bandana—that suggests the female gender of these subjects. The emphasis is on masculine attributes, such as in the genuflecting woman who kneels in an un-ladylike pose, caught in the moment of lighting her cigarette.



Female shipyard workers walking down a path returning to work after a 30-minute lunch break in the shipyard cafeteria, Vancouver, B.C., May 1943

Joseph Gibson, (n.d.)

Negative Film Black and White

National Film Board of Canada.

Library and Archives Canada. c3197950.

http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3197950&rec_nbr_list=3197922,3197950

Signatures and Inscriptions: “Women workers coming to shipyard after lunch in special shipyard cafeteria.”

Joseph Gibson (n.d.), a fellow free-lance photographer of the Still Photography Division, photographed female laborers in British Columbia just like Wright. However, in comparison with Wright’s approach, Gibson’s images have a special emphasis on the physical female features, as though to be able to capture the gendered difference of these laborers.



Private Lamb has a Quiet Afternoon in the Canteen, Vancouver Barracks, B.C.,
December 1, 1942.

Molly Lamb Bobak,

Aquarelle watercolour, pen and black ink over pencil on wove paper.

30.4 x 45.6 cm. Library and Archives Canada. c2887582.

[http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.d
isplayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=2887582&rec_nbr_list=2887582](http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=2887582&rec_nbr_list=2887582)

By 1940, only a year after the start of the war, the Canadian Army was in serious shortage of manpower.⁹ Molly Joan Lamb Bobak (1922-), who enlisted in the Canadian Women's Army Corps in January 1942, illustrated her diary with drawings of her experience.¹⁰ In an interview, Bobak recalls her earlier years in the army, saying: "And my first job was to work in the canteen in the basement, which used to be a beauty parlour for the rich ladies who used to live in the Vancouver Hotel. I had to wear a hairnet—and it absolutely sickened me—and a green uniform."¹¹ The drawing is a self-portrait of the war artist stationed in Vancouver, British Columbia, serving an agitated crowd of ten men and four women, drinking, smoking, and looking at the young girl. Bobak ironically labels this sketch as a "quiet afternoon at the canteen." In this case, the image of the working woman highlights her gendered inferiority in the military ranks and frustration in her assumed role, striving to become the later war artist.

NOTES

¹ For detailed research database: Jennifer Anne Stephen, *Pick One Intelligent Girl: Employability, Domesticity and Gendering in Canada's Welfare State, 1939-1947* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007) 39.

² Founded in 1893, the National Council of Women of Canada was instrumental in the fight for women's social rights and better living conditions during the course of the 20th century. In 2001, the Council has acquired national historic significance status by the Government of Canada for their continued work in human rights issues. "History: National Council of Women of Canada," National Council of Women of Canada (2002) <www.nwc.ca>. Ruth Roach Pierson, "Canadian Women and the Second World War," National Film Board of Canada (2008) <www3.nfb.ca/ww2/> 3.

³ In 1940, Quebec passed a law giving women the right to vote and to run for office. "Women's Rights: Human Rights in Canada," Canadian Human Rights Council <www.chrc.ccdp.ca>.

⁴ Stephen, 39.

⁵ "Canadian War Industry during the Second World War," Library and Archives Canada (10 Aug. 2004) <collectionscanada.gc.ca>. The National film Board of Canada was a governmental agency responsible of developing national propaganda within the country, especially noteworthy for its promotion of tourism, trade and the wartime effort during WWII. "National Film Board of Canada," Library and Archives Canada (19 Mar. 2008) <collectionscanada.gc.ca>.

⁶ "NFB History: 1940-1949," <www.nfb.ca/history/1940-1949>.

⁷ The Federal government established the National Selective Service in March of 1942, calling upon women to join the much needed working force; and Pierson, 1.

⁸ "War Industry," Library and Archives Canada; and "War Industry: Photographer's Showcase," Library and Archives Canada.

⁹ Pierson, 2.

¹⁰ "Artist Database: Bobak, Molly," Concordia University (21 Aug. 2009) <cwahi.concordia.ca>.

¹¹ "Talking Portraits: Molly Lamb Bobak: Canada's First Female Official War Artist," Library and Archives Canada (10 Mar. 2010) <collectionscanada.gc.ca>.

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Enid Challen of Galt, Ont. (left) and Betty Kane of Woodstock, Ont. testing chemicals used in synthetic rubber manufacture at the laboratories of the Polymer Rubber Corporation. Oct. 1943. Pearl Sammett, Sarnia, Ontario. Negative Film B/W - cellulose nitrate. National Film Board of Canada. Library and Archives Canada. c3197140.

Female shipyard workers walking down a path returning to work after a 30-minute lunch break in the shipyard cafeteria. May 1943. Joseph Gibson, (n.d.) Vancouver, B.C. Negative Film Black and White. National Film Board of Canada, Library and Archives Canada. c3197950. <collectionscanada.gc.ca>.

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Laurette Maurice, female munitions worker at the Dominion Arsenals Ltd. plant, enjoys a day sun-tanning. 24 Aug. 1942. Harry Rowed. Québec, Qc. Negative Film Black and White. National Film Board of Canada. Library and Archives Canada. c3196138. <collectionscanada.gc.ca>.

"National Film Board of Canada." Library and Archives Canada. 19 Mar. 2008.
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Norman Dowdell and Donald White delivering wood from the Municipal woodyard to Perth, Ontario residents. Spring 1943. Pearl Sammett, Perth, Ontario. Negative Film B/W - cellulose nitrate. National Film Board of Canada. Library and Archives Canada. c3197840. <collectionscanada.gc.ca>.

Pierson, Ruth Roach. "Canadian Women and the Second World War." National Film Board of Canada. 2008. <www3.nfb.ca/ww2/>.

"Photographer's Showcase: Harry Rowed (Harry Newton Rowed) (1907-)." Library and Archives Canada. 10 Aug. 2004. <collectionscanada.gc.ca>.

Private Lamb has a Quiet Afternoon in the Canteen. 1 Dec. 1942. Molly Lamb Bobak, Vancouver Barracks, B.C. Aquarelle watercolour, pen and black ink over pencil on

wove paper. 30.4 x 45.6 cm. Library and Archives Canada. c2887582.
<collectionscanada.gc.ca>.

Roberte, Hélène and Celine Perry, employees of the Dominion Arsenals munitions plant, visit the Québec City on the observation tram. 24 Aug. 1942. Harry Rowed. Québec, Qc. Negative Film Black and White. National Film Board of Canada, Library and Archives Canada. c 3192558. <collectionscanada.gc.ca>.

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"Talking Portraits: Molly Lamb Bobak: Canada's First Female Official War Artist." Library and Archives Canada. 10 Mar. 2010. <collectionscanada.gc.ca>.

Three unidentified male residents of Perth, Ontario, cutting their supply of wood for the winter. Sept. 1943. Pearl Sammett. Perth, Ontario. Negative Film B/W - cellulose nitrate. National Film Board of Canada. Library and Archives Canada. c3197839. <collectionscanada.gc.ca>.

Two female laboratory workers test synthetic rubber in the Polymer Rubber Corporation plant. Jan. 1944. Pearl Sammett. Negative Film B/W - cellulose nitrate. National Film Board of Canada. Library and Archives Canada. c3196988. <collectionscanada.gc.ca>.

Woman worker operates a machine at the Dominion Arsenals Ltd. plant in front of a statue of the Sacred Heart. 24 Aug. 1942. Harry Rowed. Quebec, Qc. Negative Film Black and White. National Film Board of Canada, Library and Archives Canada. c3196118. <collectionscanada.gc.ca>.

Women loggers smoking cigarettes on a break. Apr. 1943. Richard Wright. Queen Charlotte Islands, B.C. Negative Film Black and White. National Film Board of Canada, Library and Archives Canada. c3196781. <collectionscanada.gc.ca>.

Women munitions workers enjoy a lunch-time walk with friends at the Dominion Arsenals Ltd. plant. 24 Aug. 1942. Harry Rowed. Québec, Qc., Negative Film Black and White. National Film Board of Canada. Library and Archives Canada. c 3196148. <collectionscanada.gc.ca>.

"Women Photographers: Pearl Sammett and Elyse Gagnon." Library and Archives Canada. 10 Aug. 2004. <collectionscanada.gc.ca>.

"Women's Rights: Human Rights in Canada." Canadian Human Rights Council. <www.chrc.ccdp.ca>.

Women shipbuilders working on a ship in a Vancouver shipyard. Jun. 1943. Richard Wright. Vancouver, B.C. Negative Film Black and White. National Film Board of Canada. Library and Archives Canada. c3196667. <collectionscanada.gc.ca>.

Women workers amongst a pile of army service uniforms check them for size at the Great Western Garment Co. 16 Apr. 1942. Harry Rowed. Edmonton, Alta. Negative Film Black and White. National Film Board of Canada, Library and Archives Canada. c3597740. <collectionscanada.gc.ca>.

Women workers stitch service uniforms using sewing machines at the Great Western Garment Co. 16 Apr. 1942. Harry Rowed. Edmonton, Alta. Negative Film Black and White. National Film Board of Canada. Library and Archives Canada. c3597745. <collectionscanada.gc.ca>.

LESSON PLAN FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Title: Gender equality and representation in Canada

Introduction: Canadian Women Workers during WWII

Show group of images from Library and Archives collections to the students and ask them to compare and contrast these workers to today's workers. What are the obvious features that stand out?

Activity 1: Writing down First Impressions

Ask students to make a short list of 5 features for each period's worker. Once they are done, ask a few of them to share it with the class, perhaps write it down on the black board, as they give out their answers.

Lesson: Gender equality

Start with the lesson about gender issues. Talk about gender inequality, how women worked and how that changed during WWII. Go back to the images; ask them to name a feature that seems like evidence of the female social status. Speak about feminist movements, human rights, and the social change in the 1960's. Speak of how, today, in some countries women still suffer with discrimination and a lack of basic human rights (i.e. right to education, medical care)

Activity 2: Testing the Knowledge

Ask students to write a **2-page essay** about human rights and gender equality in Canada.

Question: Women have children, shouldn't they stay home and take care of the house and kids? What about paternity leaves? Is that considered gender equality? Why