



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Rural Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jrurstud

Labouring against the grain of progress: Women's reforestation work in British Columbia, 1960–1975



Michael Ekers*

University of Toronto, Scarborough, Canada

A B S T R A C T

Keywords:

Gender
Reforestation
Forestry
Work
Quality
Quantity
British Columbia

This article examines the history of women's reforestation work in British Columbia (BC), Canada in the 1960s and 1970s. Throughout the era, white working-class women were employed by the government to plant trees on cut-over land. Women's work in BC's forestlands is often obscured by a triumphal discourse that celebrates the rise of white, middle-class contractors and workers as a progressive force in the forestry sector. Through oral histories and interviews with members of the British Columbia Forest Service and the women employed on government planting projects, this article discusses the social positioning of women within the history of reforestation. Building on the work of Geoff Mann and a number of feminist interventions, the article examines how the categories of 'quality' and 'quantity' played an ideological role in framing women as an atavistic presence in the industry. Finally, following Walter Benjamin's method of historical study, the article rethinks common negative portrayals of women's labour, through considering the progressive moments found within their work and the challenges the women posed to post-war gendered norms of life and work.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Evaluating histories of reforestation

The history of the tree planting industry in Canada since the mid 1970s reveals a labour force comprised of largely white middle-class men and women. This is a remarkable phenomenon for a resource industry, especially given the trajectory of the reforestation sector in the United States, which has relied on a largely migrant, and at times, undocumented Latino workforce (Mann, 2001; Casanova and McDaniel, 2005; McDaniel and Casanova, 2005; Prudham, 2005; Sarathy, 2006). The exceptionalism of the Canadian case has not been lost on its participants who have tended to celebrate their role in the industry as 'eco-pioneers' working on the 'frontier' greening the spaces degraded by industrial forestry practices. A series of press articles (see Pringle, 1988; Curtis, 1998; Coupland, 2002; Kuitenbrouwer, 2005; Rankin, 2005; McLean, 2007), acclaimed artistic projects (Aletti, 2005a, 2005b; Scott, 2007; Schleussner, 2006) and Charlotte Gill's (2011) award-winning non-fiction book titled *Eating Dirt*, have popularised, and

frequently, have romanticised the work and cultural milieu of tree planters.

In British Columbia (BC), Canada's most western province, white middle-class contractors and planters emerged in the late 1960s as the provincial British Columbia Forest Service (BCFS) began to look to the private sector as a means of meeting the increasing volume of trees that were to be planted in the 1970s through to today. The contractors began to replace government planting crews made up of white working-class women from rural communities across BC. The contractors introduced a piece-rate wage scheme and a series of other innovations that individualised the labour process and refined the practice of planting trees. As a result of the changes, contractor planters quickly doubled and tripled the production of the women-dominated BCFS crews. The government planting crews were quickly phased out as the production-oriented contractors were seen as the future of the growing industry.

In my research focussing on the cultural, labour and environmental history of the tree planting industry, I interviewed an early contract planter who reflected on the advent of contractor tree planting in the late 1960s and early 1970s as follows:

I think [tree planting] was the last frontier industry because it was brand new. It was brand new. So we start this industry and work out all the systems for it. It also takes place on the frontier, way out there... way, way away from support systems and cities

* Permanent address: Department of Human Geography, Social Sciences Building, 1265 Military Trail, U of T, Scarborough, Toronto, ON M1C 1A4, Canada. Tel.: +1 416 806 4443.

E-mail address: mekers@utsc.utoronto.ca.

and everything else out there in the wilderness. (Robert, contract planter and supervisor, 1970s)

Walter Benjamin (1999, p. 70) argued that evocations of 'progress' should be critically interrogated the moment that progress is "presented... as a measure of the span separating a legendary beginning from a legendary end of history." Benjamin's warning against legendary beginnings and endings is invaluable in understanding Robert's remarks. A historical span emerges in his comments between a representation of tree planting as 'brand new' and paradoxically as a movement that signifies the 'end of history', because tree planting is 'the last frontier' industry that occurs 'way way away from support systems and cities'. The play of time and space in Robert's description of tree planting gives reason to pause and consider what social histories are eclipsed in the span between the assumed novel creation of tree planting and the foreclosure of history.

As I will argue in this article, despite Robert's remarks, tree planting was far from brand new as working-class women had been employed by the BCFS as tree planters for the better part of a decade before the contractors and their labour force emerged. The supposed novelty of tree planting obscures a rich history of women working in the woods and is part of a larger discourse offered by contractors which saw the working women and the BCFS as antiquated and parochial. One contractor commented that "the whole model and planting style of the time was inefficient" (Jason, contract planter and contractor, 1970s) and another planter boldly stated that contract tree planters "blew [the women's crews] out of the water" (Jonathan, planter and contractor, 1970s). The triumphalism of white-class middle planters operated through profiling the productivity of the men and women employed by the contractors against the lower production levels achieved by the government crews comprised of almost all women. This juxtaposition between what was considered progressive and what was considered atavistic is an invitation to read history against the grain as Benjamin (1999) would encourage us to do.

Reflecting on cultural-historical study, and specifically his methodological commitments, Benjamin (1989, p. 46), suggested how "very easy [it is], given a specific perspective, to establish binary divisions for the various 'fields' of any given epoch, so that the 'fruitful,' 'forward-looking,' 'vital,' 'positive' lies on one side, and the fruitless, backward extinct part of the epoch on the other." Under this rubric, the valorisation and denigration of different aspects of a historical period come into relief through contrasting one against the other as if they were binary opposites. Thus Benjamin (1989, p. 60) warns against a "homogeneous and continuous presentation of history" in which the 'the old' is progressively eclipsed by what is considered 'new' and 'vital'. Benjamin therefore requires us to critically evaluate the hegemonic narrative that sees the 'progressive' force of contractor planting as representing a significant advancement on the BCFS's reforestation efforts. It is important then to consider the multiple *histories* rather than the singular *history* of tree planting and to examine the ways in which these histories are socially valued and de-valued.

Building on Benjamin's reflections on cultural-historical study, the first aim of this article is to examine the little-known history of women's work in the BC forestscape from the early 1960s to the mid 1970s, which has been hidden by dominant narratives that centre white middle-class workers as the protagonists of labour in the sector. Through oral histories with women that worked for the BCFS and with members of the Forest Service, I examine why working-class women emerged as tree planters and how their labour was valued and de-valued through an ideology and practice that positioned the women as 'quality planters' rather than 'production planters'.

Benjamin's method demands a further layer of analysis that helps in getting beyond a binary framing of different historical movements as progressive and atavistic. Against the forward and backward partitioning of historical elements, Benjamin (1989, p. 46) argues "it is of decisive importance to subject [the] tentatively isolated, negative part to another division, so that, with a shift of point of view... it too will reveal a new positive element, different from the one previously described." Building on this point, Benjamin requires that we rethink the valuation of working-class women as an atavistic presence in the reforestation sector in the 1960s and 1970s. The second aim of this article then is to argue that women's 'experiences' of reforestation work contained an immanent critique of the forestry industry and post-war gender relations in rural communities. More specifically, I argue that internal to the women's participation in the silviculture sector, and the meanings they attached to their work, was a critique of their positioning as the 'backward' element of the industry. The challenges the women posed to the domestic ideals of the post-war era in forestry communities signalled an implicit critique of the masculinisation of forestry work and life. Additionally, as I hope to demonstrate, their experiences of work, and the meanings they ascribed to their employment, both reinforced and troubled the linkage between femininity and quality-oriented work.

2. On 'quantity' and 'quality' and women's resource labour

In pursuing the two central aims of the article – accounting for the history of women's work in the BC reforestation sector and the immanent criticalness of their work – I draw on Geoff Mann's (2007) work on the cultural politics of the wage and feminist literature on work and rural space, which I discuss below and throughout the article. In his book, *Our Daily Bread*, Mann (2007) sets out to crack open the wage in order to reveal its political and cultural content. He stresses that the wage is neither 'the golden chain of capitalism', nor a transparent quantifiable distribution of income. Rather, Mann (2007, p. xii) compellingly demonstrates how the wage "matters...to categories such as race, gender, nation, class, individuality and freedom." Mann asks us to reconsider the fetishistic focus on the *quantity* of the wage and suggests that we examine its *qualitative* dimensions, which refers to its cultural and political content. For instance, Mann asks why in struggles over wages does the last penny matter more than the others do. In other words, why does a wage of \$10.00 an hour mean so much more than a wage of \$9.99? Mann's answer is that the last penny is qualitatively different from the first 99, and is socially and culturally significant in the construction of social identities. The historical circumstances and political movements in which the quantity of the wage is complicated by its qualitative aspects amount to what Mann describes as the 'politics of measure'.

Mann's insightful reflections on the categories of 'quality' and 'quantity' are helpful in thinking about the binary positioning of the working-class women's crews and the rise of middle-class contractor tree planting. Although Mann's work concerns wage struggles, his arguments are useful in considering the social positioning of each group of workers rather than wage rates per se. As I will contend, the partitioning of the BCFS women's crews to the 'backwards' side of history occurred through a narrative which suggests that women planted high quality trees, but few of them. The connection between women, 'quality work' and low production levels, ideologically linked these workers with the 'backward' and increasingly obsolete history of tree planting, as greater emphasis was placed on the quantity of seedlings planted by workers over the course of the 1960s and 1970s.

Research participants treated the quantity and quality of trees planted by the women planters as self-evident. As I will discuss, the

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6545853>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6545853>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)