

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Kaler, Amy. *Baby Trouble in the Last Best West: Making New People in Alberta, 1905-1939*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017, 190 pp, \$24.95, paper (9781442613942).

Amy Kaler opens her volume with the question “What would it mean for social history to take reproduction seriously?” The answer is focussed on what Kaler calls *baby trouble*, or those babies “who were born under difficult or awkward circumstances; the women whose mothering made them into inconvenient subjects for the state; the men who took or did not take responsibility for these women and children; and the collective fears and strategies that were mustered up in response to the endless conundrums posed by human reproduction” (3). This is a concise and well-informed volume on the history of reproduction in Alberta from the early days of the twentieth century to the eve of World War II, and is indeed a social history that takes not only reproduction seriously but also focuses on women who bore the burden of reproduction under difficult circumstances.

Baby Trouble covers five major topics relevant to reproduction and mothering. Kaler opens with birth itself and its attendant dangers, the lack of medical personnel, the lack of training for nursing in Alberta and the resultant turf wars between physicians and nurses. This is followed by a history of the Beulah Rescue Home for unmarried mothers in Edmonton. Operating from 1909 to 1964, and not officially closed until 1979, the home managed pregnant women and their babies and was involved in the adoption process for those who were giving up their babies. Next is a turn to a subject about which much has been written in recent years, Alberta’s legacy of the sterilization of the “feeble-minded” residents of Alberta’s psychiatric institutions. Kaler focuses particularly on the United Farm Women of Alberta (the most prominent of the women’s organizations) that not only supported but also actively encouraged the government to proceed with its eugenics program, highlighting the ambivalent relationship we have historically to this episode in Alberta history. Another chapter is devoted to the economics of mothering, specifically the history of mother’s allowance and the creation of the Alberta’s Mother’s Allowance Act in 1919. This is fascinating for the complex way in which women’s lives were regulated. Mother’s allowance was

used as both carrot and stick, the latter in the form of the withdrawal of allowances to punish women who were not deemed good mothers. Finally, Kaler covers the problem of infant mortality, which while not unique to Alberta or Western Canada, represents a kind of failure of reproduction. All of these cases unfold against a background of crises in the period under consideration—crises of a boom and bust agricultural economy, war, Spanish flu, real estate collapse and more. On the whole, this is an important addition to our knowledge of early twentieth century Alberta history, and also contributes to the crucial role played by women and children (and their invisible or absent male partners) in this history.

Given the variety of concerns, topics and people that populate these accounts, it is not necessarily going to result in a coherent picture or a seamless narrative. But Kaler unifies her multiple accounts around a question of the “social imaginary” of reproduction and motherhood. The concept of a social imaginary is Charles Taylor’s; he means by this the “ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (Taylor, 2002: 106). Since Taylor’s original articulation of his notion of the social imaginary, scholars in various disciplines have taken it up in multiple ways. It is clear why; an *imaginary* is not a *theory* that people hold. An imaginary is reflected in people’s images, stories and legends, argues Taylor, and it is not only widely shared but provides a legitimacy to particular ways of seeing and being in the world. People imagine their social worlds often without expressing this in anything resembling theoretical terms. And it includes both how things are and how things ought to be. Applied to the question of reproduction in early 20th century Alberta, Kaler attempts to weave a kind of social imaginary of pregnancy, birth, infancy and motherhood at a time when the new province was both ‘frontier’ and a representative location in a far-flung corner of the British empire. Given the flexibility of Taylor’s notion of a social imaginary, this works reasonably well. In his original formulation of it, Taylor meant it not merely as a way of accounting for the emergence of a new conception of the moral order in western modernity, but he also used it as a way of formulating what he called “the rise of new principles of sociality” (Taylor, 2002, p. 99). Because Kaler’s work is a history, there is not much said about how this episode in Alberta’s history gave way to the new and the present but that is not a shortcoming. As contemporary readers, we already know from our own social imaginary how things have changed.

What I found curious about her use of the social imaginary is that Kaler argues for an “imaginative economy of reproduction” (5). Her

definition of this is close to Taylor's social imaginary, in so far as it includes "the ways in which childbearing figures in how people think about themselves, individually and collectively, and the way these meanings change over time" (5). However, the use of "economy" is puzzling, especially as later in the volume Kaler refers to an "economy of babies" and an "economy of feminine virtue" which are part of a larger "political economy of reproduction"—the latter a phrase more widely used by contemporary scholars. I can appreciate that childbearing and childrearing are very much embedded in the production and reproduction of agrarian economies. Furthermore, this work can be placed in the tradition of Canadian sociologies of reproduction of which there is now a sizable literature. But the relationship between economies and imaginaries is not clearly developed and plays a minor role in the historical material. At times, these two conceptions seem more like an add-on to integrate the somewhat disparate narratives. However, this in no way diminishes the important contribution this volume makes to our understanding of the history of reproduction and mothering in Alberta. It places reproduction squarely on the agenda of regional histories and complements a number of earlier important studies on the history of women in Alberta. It is not only an important volume for historians of Alberta but also for those who are interested in histories of reproduction and mothering in Canada more generally.

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REFERENCE

Taylor, Charles. 2002. Modern social imaginaries. *Public Culture*, 14, 91-124.

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