Women in the Quebec Cotton Industry 1890-1950

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Résumé

De nombreux auteurs nous ont présenté dans le passé une image profondément négative du travail et de la vie des femmes employées dans l'industrie. Ils ont insisté sur les obstacles à la participation des femmes à la vie syndicale et aux démonstrations de militantisme de la classe ouvrière, au point que ces femmes nous apparaissent souvent comme d'impuissantes victimes constamment opprimées. Une étude des ouvrières employées dans les filatures du Québec entre 1891 et 1951 révèle une réalité plus complexe. On pourra lire ici une étude plus élaborée, reposant en large partie sur des interviews menées auprès de quatre groupes d'ouvrières. Malgré le bilan positif que presque toutes font de leurs années passées dans les filatures, lorsqu'on examine les changements survenus dans les caractéristiques démographiques de la main-d'œuvre féminine et dans le genre de travail que celle-ci exécutait, on observe une érosion progressive de la position des femmes au sein de l'industrie durant la première moitié du XX^e siècle. La marginalisation des ouvrières, résultat de divers facteurs économiques, technologiques et culturels, s'est traduite par une diminution de leur participation à l'action syndicale.

Abstract

Many authors writing about female industrial workers in the past have created a profoundly negative image of both their work and their lives. They have stressed the obstacles to their involvement in labour organizations and in demonstrations of working class militancy to the point that women workers often appear as constantly oppressed, powerless victims. An examination of women employed in the Quebec cotton mills between 1891 and 1951 reveals a more complex reality. What follows is part of a more extensive study based in large part on interviews with four cohorts of female workers. Although nearly all gave a positive assessment of the years they spent in the mills, by comparing changes in the demographic characteristics of the female work force and in the kind of work women performed, it is evident that woman's position within the industry was eroded as the twentieth century progressed. The marginalization of female operatives, brought about by a combination of economic, technological and cultural factors, resulted in a decrease in their labour activism.

My interest in women's participation in the Quebec cotton industry arose from teaching a course on the history of women in Canada, which I initiated in 1975. Looking for materials relating to women and industrialization in the 1970s, I was struck by the paucity of relevant secondary sources and by the overwhelmingly negative assessment of women's experience in the factory system presented in the studies that did exist. Not only were women workers subject to terrible, dehumanizing working conditions, but by accepting wages that were habitually half those men received, they were often held responsible for impeding the improvement of men's wages in particular, and the development of a class consciousness in general.[1] Writings about women workers published in the late 1970s did begin to challenge the image of the female industrial worker as a passive victim, uninterested in, or incapable of, engaging in working-class militancy, but they too stressed the oppressive nature of the factory system and the numerous obstacles—demographic, structural and ideological—to the expression of solidarity among women working in industry.[2]

According to most accounts, the demographic characteristics of the female work force made it extremely difficult to organize women in any occupation. Female workers were young and single and entered paid employment for only a brief period prior to marriage. Once married, the vast majority traded work for wages for unpaid reproductive and domestic labour.

Another argument frequently advanced to

explain the sorry lot of female factory workers, and their lack of militancy, has focused on the sexual division of labour and the structural basis of women's employment. Because women were nearly always unskilled workers and easily replaced, they were not likely to endanger their already precarious position by engaging in militant behaviour. In addition, the sex-segregated nature of the work process had the result that men and women seldom performed the same work or shared the same work space. Therefore, opportunities for women to interact with men who might have possessed a more pronounced class consciousness were severely limited.

Then there are the various ideological factors that have been used to account for women's failure to improve their position in the factory setting. An all-pervasive gender system that represented women as nurturing, unaggressive, irrational and subservient was not conducive to either men or women viewing female workers as constituting a significant force in the battle between labour and capital. It was unthinkable for most women to engage in behaviour which was considered "unladylike," such as walking a picket line or speaking out at union meetings, attended almost exclusively by men, where the "atmosphere was repellent and unhealthy."[3]

Such conclusions, however, were frequently based on very slender evidence. It was apparent that a better understanding of the extent and nature of women's militancy in the workplace and of the inter-connectedness between work and family could only be gained through the detailed analysis of specific groups of female workers. It was with this objective in mind that I began my own study of women's contribution to the development of the textile industry and the impact women's wage labour had on their domestic lives. A number of factors influenced the choice of women workers in Quebec, including the pre-eminence of Quebec in Canadian cotton textile production and the extensive reliance of cotton manufacturers in that province on female labour. This interest was enhanced by the fact that the one detailed study of the Quebec cotton industry published in 1974 devoted only a few pages to women and children, despite the fact that for several decades, women accounted for the majority of the workers.[4] In 1911, women comprised over half of the industry's work force, and although their presence subsequently diminished, in 1951 one of every three workers was a woman.

Quebec was a particularly attractive area for cotton manufacturers because of the province's transportation system and natural and human resources. Montreal was not only the largest city in the Dominion, but, as the main railway centre for the emerging transcontinental railway, it provided access to an expanding market in the West while branch lines running into the United States facilitated the importation of raw cotton from that country. Moreover, there was an abundance of excellent water power sites in the province and a seemingly limitless supply of unskilled French-Canadian labour resulting from an excess of population relative to the supply of arable land.

Several other features of cotton manufacturing made it inherently interesting to study. Cotton mills have been the harbingers of industrialization and represent the first large-scale application of industrial technology to production. In both the United States and Canada, it was the cotton textile industry which provided a model for modern financial and manufacturing organization by demontrating the potential of horizontal and vertical integration.[5] In 1844, the first limited liability company in Canadian manufacturing was set up to establish a cotton mill in Sherbrooke, Quebec. It housed 1200 spindles and produced grey sheetings. With the increased tariffs imposed by the Conservative government of John A. Macdonald in 1879, Canadian entrepreneurs achieved a significant degree of protection from British and American imports, and the number of cotton mills grew rapidly. When overproduction led to serious problems for the owners, they created cartels and trusts to regulate the industry. The most important mergers occurred in 1905 with the creation of Dominion Textile from four existing companies which together possessed over half of the looms and spindles in Canada.

The women workers employed by this company and its affiliate, Montreal Cottons, established in 1874 by several of the same prominent entrepreneurs, are the principal subjects of my research. In addition to consulting the usual historical records, such as annual corporate financial statements, federal and provincial censuses, royal commission reports, trade journals and newspapers, I am also making extensive use of oral history. I have been able to interview over eighty women whose work experience in cotton mills in the communities of Valleyfield and Magog spanned more than four decades from 1908 into the 1950s. The overwhelming majority of the respondents have described their work

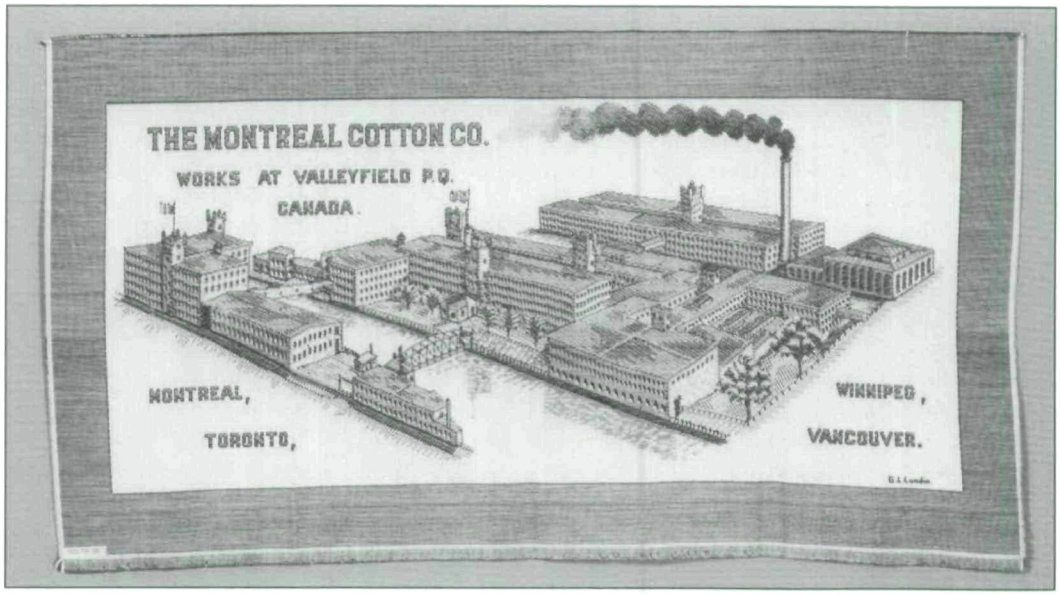

Fig. 1
Woven picture showing the Montreal Cotton Company works at Valleyfield, Quebec about 1920. (Courtesy of Royal Ontario Museum, ROM 920.95.20, gift of Mr. G.G. Jaffray)

experience in terms very much at odds with the descriptions contained in the secondary literature. Most found the work personally gratifying and regretted having to leave it when required to do so.

The cotton companies in Quebec used the Slater or family method as their principal means of recruiting workers, and the practice of sending agents into the countryside to persuade entire families to move to the mill centres continued well into the 1920s. In the 1880s, it was not uncommon to find girls and boys as young as ten years of age in the mills, and among the first cohort (or group) of women workers interviewed—those born between 1895 and 1904—the mean age for work force entry was 15.3 years. Over half of the members of the group began their employment when they were fourteen years of age or younger. Despite the passage of provincial legislation in 1885 prohibiting the factory employment of boys under twelve years of age and of girls under fourteen years, during the early 1920s some families were still sending daughters as young as twelve years old into the mills. The average age at entry did eventually rise, to just over seventeen years for the women in the fourth cohort of my study (that is, born between 1925 and 1934).

Family and kin networks were extremely important, not only for the recruitment of new workers but also for the determination of their work assignments. Throughout the entire period under review, French-Canadian families provided the unskilled and semi-skilled labour needed in the grey mills, while British and English-Canadian workers held a virtual monopoly on skilled positions in the dye and print works. Some French-Canadian children who carried lunches to the factory for their family members were initiated into factory work routines during the noon hour under the watchful eye of a relative. Close relatives frequently worked in the same departments because foremen tended to do their hiring on the basis of family connections. For the most part, girls and women found employment as doffers, drawing frame tenders, ring spinners, weavers and cloth inspectors; a few were also able to secure employment as pantographers, folders and packers in the print works.

Although managers and male employees liked to point out that their industry was a pioneer in providing employment opportunities for women, and equal pay for equal work, there was a very clear and all-pervasive sexual division of labour. Men's employment ranged from the heaviest, unskilled and dirtiest work through skilled and supervisory work to management positions. Women, on the other hand, were confined to tasks that were defined as semi-skilled at best and not considered to require great physical exertion. Among the women interviewed who did not marry and remained in the mills until retirement, none experienced any significant upward mobility; in fact, some reported performing essentially the same tasks, day after day, for half a century. This sexual division of labour was the result of a complex interaction of economic, cultural and political factors. As time went on, the assignment of work on the basis of sex became more

pronounced so that by the end of the period under review a higher proportion of the female workers were assigned to unskilled jobs, such as folding and packing, than was the case in the earlier part of the twentieth century. Women were also excluded from supervisory positions until the 1940s when a handful were appointed as overseers to supervise female sewing-machine operators employed in making bedclothes and draperies.

Clearly the choice of technology and the organization of production had a direct impact on the differentiated roles of men and women within the mills and printworks, but other factors, such as the attitudes and degree of organization among male workers and cultural values concerning the employment of women, were also important. Mule spinning, in Canada as in Britain, was an exclusively male occupation. The size and complexity of the machine, the danger the moving carriage of the mule presented to women wearing long skirts and the necessity for a lengthy apprenticeship were the reasons most frequently cited for the exclusion of women from this work. However, as William Lazonick has persuasively argued, patriarchal expectations also played an important role since it was considered inappropriate for women to wield authority over, or to discipline, the piecers needed to operate the machines.[6] Moreover, mule spinners used their status and power as organized skilled workers to keep women out of their ranks. Their control over the productive process was eventually destroyed, however, by the replacement of mule spinning by ring spinning. As is so often the case, Canadian practice was influenced by both American invention and British tradition. Manufacturers here were slower than their American counterparts to adopt the ring spindle, despite its many economic advantages, because they preferred the finer cloth produced by mule spinning. Nonetheless, as a result of the refinement of the ring spinning process and the better quality of yarn produced, by the 1920s the mules had been replaced by ring spindles minded by female workers. Other technological developments of the late nineteenth century such as the introduction of the automatic loom and the electric stop facilitated the employment of women in weaving as well.

Technology, however, does not exist in a vacuum and its implementation must be related to prevailing social attitudes toward female employment. For example, a survey of French-Canadian prescriptive literature and factory inspectors' reports at the end of the nineteenth century reveals little opposition to the employment of girls and women. The main concerns were the working woman's morality and whether or not conditions in the factories were putting it into jeopardy.[7] The family was not only the idealized fundamental social unit of this Roman Catholic society but also the primary economic unit. With industrialization, the pre-industrial family wage economy was transferred from a rural setting to an urban, industrial one, and children were expected to contribute to the family's income as soon as possible. It is interesting that unlike French-Canadian wives in the New England States, rarely did married women work in the Quebec mills.[8] It was socially acceptable only for widows or married women whose husbands had deserted them to engage in paid employment. This difference in the labour force behaviour of women of the same culture is probably best explained by the differing labour market needs and attitudes of manufacturers on either side of the Canadian-American border. Until the late 1920s, the New England mills were beset by labour shortages and mill managers encouraged experienced married women to work for them. In Quebec, on the other hand, the supply of surplus, single farm women was adequate to meet the industry's requirements for female operatives.

As feminism began to make inroads into the province after the turn of the century, religious and lay nationalist leaders railed against the destruction of the family, for which they partially blamed this "foreign", "Protestant" ideology. They stressed the importance of married women's reproductive role, especially since French Canadians were increasingly a minority within the overall Canadian population. Women of the study's second and third cohorts—those born between 1905 and 1914, and 1915 and 1924—who entered the mills for the most part in the 1920s and 1930s consistently reported that it was company policy to fire women who married. The hostility toward married women working for wages was reinforced as the ideal of the *family wage economy* gave way to that of the family wage, an improved wage that was to be earned by a male breadwinner. The emphasis on the male wage earner was greatly strengthened during the Great Depression when union leaders and managers shared the view that married women should not be given employment when there were so many unemployed men. Even the right of single women to secure wage labour was challenged by male trade union leaders who argued that they were

taking away work that rightfully belonged to young men, and failing to acquire the domestic skills that were necessary for them to prepare for their "real" work as wives and mothers.[9]

Thus it is not surprising that during the 1930s men took over jobs that had previously been assigned to women. Again the case of spinning is instructive. According to women interviewed in Magog, men who had lost their jobs at a neighbouring mill owned by the same company were transferred to the spinning department in Magog where they took over "women's" work. Company records also indicate an increase in the proportion of spinners and weavers who were male and also a trend toward the replacement of women, who were covered by minimum wage legislation after 1929, by men who were not and who could legally be paid less than the women.[10] Women who retained their jobs were more likely to find themselves confined to lower paying, less skilled positions such as doffer or battery hand. In 1931, twenty-five per cent of the female production workers were weavers, and twenty-five per cent were spinners, but ten years later, the corresponding percentages were twenty and twenty-one.[11] It was only with the outbreak of the World War II and the resulting expansion of production that women regained and extended their position within the cotton mills. Enhanced employment opportunities were short-lived, however, and with the return of peace, employment for women was once again primarily of a less skilled nature and located on the periphery of actual cloth production. Increasingly women found employment as folders, pressers, packers and sewing machine operators.

By the 1940s, significant differences in women's life cycles began to manifest themselves as well. Women of the fourth birth cohort, those born between 1925 and 1934, were distinguishable from those of the other three cohorts by later age of entry into the mills, a shorter period of employment before marriage, and re-entry into paid employment once their children attained school age. Their resumption of wage work was encouraged by mill managers who found that this reserve of experienced, married women provided them with the flexibility to expand or reduce the work force as rapidly changing market conditions dictated.

The changes in the length and patterns of French-Canadian women's employment in the cotton industry had, it seems, important repercussions for their militancy and participation in union activities. At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, there were numerous instances when female operatives initiated work stoppages to protest working conditions. Because they entered the mills at a very young age, many had several years of paid employment

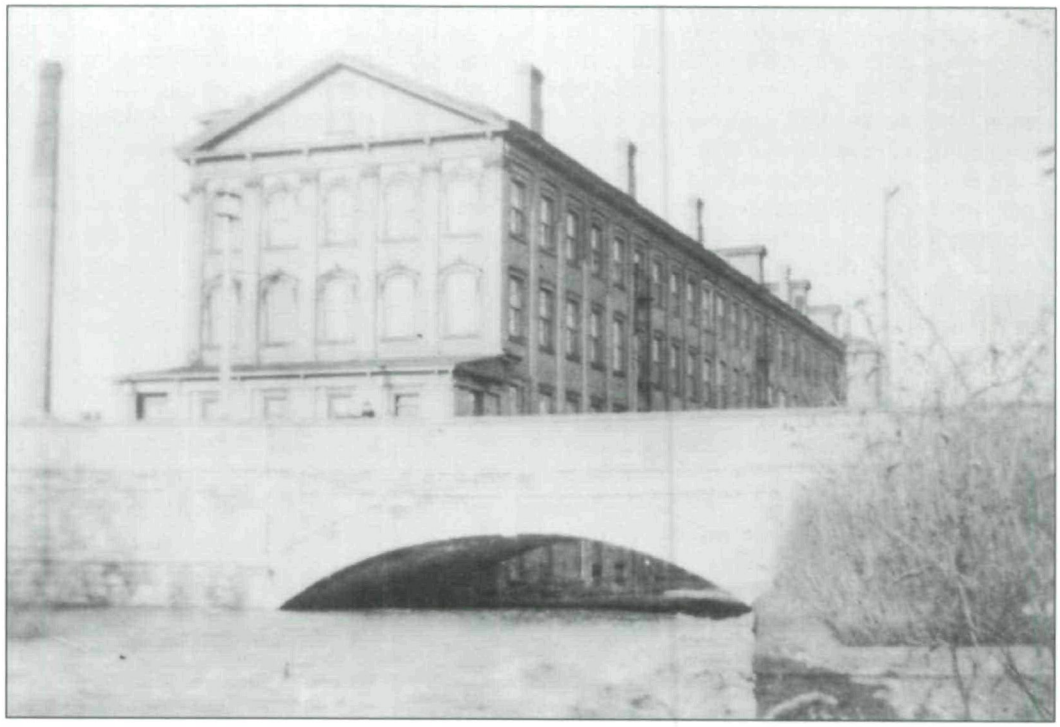

Fig. 2
Dundas Cotton Mill, Dundas Ontario. (Courtesy of Royal Ontario Museum)

before marriage, and had an opportunity to develop a degree of workplace solidarity. Often the grievances they aired were either solely or largely of concern to women, examples of which included protests against a system of fines that applied only to women and children and the dismissal of foremen who treated the women fairly (as opposed to those who unduly rewarded "favourites" or who engaged in various forms of sexual harassment). The names given to various strikes by the local press, such as "la grève des femmes" or "la grève des jeunes filles" clearly indicate the central role that women could and did play in labour disputes.[12] Female operatives also played a visible role in the first large-scale union movement among Quebec's cotton workers. When the Fédération des ouvriers de textile du Canada was formed in 1906, organizers signed up women as well as men. Many of the locals had female vice-presidents, and in the case of Valleyfield, women workers had their own local.[13]

While the Confédération des travailleurs catholiques du Canada, which originated in 1921, also admitted female workers, the blatantly discriminatory policies and practices of the leadership provided little incentive for women workers to get involved; in fact, some of the women interviewed who were working in the 1930s explained that their lack of interest in union affairs originated from their perception that the Roman Catholic unions were undermining the position of women. During the same decade, women found themselves shunted into positions that accorded them even less control over the productive process and thereby afforded them less leverage. After World War II, women's work experience was more likely to be fragmented as the length of time between beginning paid employment and getting married declined. Married women more frequently re-entered the work force than previously but still shouldered the primary responsibility for child rearing and so had little time for union involvement. Moreover, although postwar unions, such as the United Textile Workers of America, officially favoured greater equality between male and female workers than did the Roman Catholic unions, the size and importance of the female work force within the industry had already been substantially diminished. With the strengthening of the union through mechanisms such as the Rand formula's provision of automatic check-offs of union dues, the expression of worker grievances was more carefully channelled, and the opportunity for women workers to act independently was effectively eliminated.

Issues and Future Direction of Research

This research has been simultaneously very exhilarating and frustrating, with both of these emotions originating from the complexity of the topic. In order to capture the essence of women's experience in the cotton industry and the meaning of that experience at both an individual and societal level, it has been necessary to draw on the literature and methods of several branches of history—most notably economic and business history, labour history, family history and women's history. The most difficult issue has been the choice of a conceptual framework and a narrative structure that allows for the effective integration of all of these elements. Initially I planned to write a book in which the cotton workers' experience would be analyzed across three time periods. Reflecting conventional periodization in Canadian historical writing, the first section was to have dealt with the years up to and including World War I; the next, the inter-war period; and the final one, the post-World War II era. However, the disadvantages of such a structure quickly became evident. Changes in the relationship between work and family and comparisons of the life cycle behaviour of these women over time, and with French-Canadian women in Quebec in general, were impossible to document using this approach. Grouping women together on the basis of a broad period during which they began working masked important differences in their life experiences. Some women entered paid employment only when they were older and already married, while others entered as adolescents. Were changes in age at marriage, family size or employment patterns observable among women employed during the different periods reflecting changes in the work place, or were there equally significant differences among women based on generational divisions? By dividing the workers by birth cohort, such differences could hopefully be more clearly identified and interpreted, and comparisons could be made with the work of historical demographers who routinely use cohort analysis. As a result, my revised approach has been to try to start from the experience of the women workers of each cohort, to identify their primary social and demographic

characteristics, why and how they were recruited, the kind of work they performed, the working conditions they experienced, the impact their employment had on their family relationships, and the degree of their involvement in labour activism.

One of the main themes that merit further investigation from a cross-national perspective is the relationship of technology to gender roles and gender relations. What is the role of technology in the initial formation and the subsequent reformulation of the sexual division of labour? Under what conditions do gender relations or other considerations act as an obstacle to the implementation of technological innovation, and to changes in the organization of production? Were managers of mills always cognizant of the likely repercussions on the sexual division of labour of their opting for new machinery or work processes? How did other changes within the industry—for example, in targeted markets and/or in raw materials used in making the product—affect the work and the working conditions of the mill hands? It seems evident that for women spinners the decision of the manufacturers to substitute cheaper types of raw cotton had a significant negative impact. As pieceworkers, they experienced substantial wage reductions due to time spent piecing together broken threads when the cotton was of an inferior grade.

Another area for further research is that of worker "culture". To what extent did men and women share the same perceptions and experiences of wage work, even when they were in the same work environment? Was there a distinctive women's "industrial culture" that differed from that of male workers?

On a more general note, we need to compare our findings with those regarding other industries. To what extent is the textile industry representative of the evolution of industrial processes? Were the changes in the relationships in the sexual division of labour that occurred over time in this industry similar to those that happened within other industries? The colloquium from which the papers in this issue are drawn provided a rare and enriching opportunity to advance the flow of information and the dialogue relevant to these and other issues.

Notes

1. For an early example, see Jean Thomson Scott, *The Conditions of Female Labour in Ontario* (Toronto: Warwick & Sons, 1892), 27.
2. See, for example, Alice Klein and Wayne Roberts, "Besieged Innocence: The 'Problem' and the Problems of Working Women – Toronto 1896–1914," in Penny Acton et al., *Women at Work, Ontario, 1850–1930* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1974), 211–259; Wayne Roberts, Honest Womanhood: *Feminism, Femininity and Class Consciousness among Toronto Working Women, 1893–1914* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1976); Joan Sangster, "The 1907 Bell Telephone Strike: Organizing Women Workers," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 3 (1978): 109–30.
3. Roberts, *Honest Womanhood, 44.*
4. Jacques Rouillard, *Les travailleurs du coton au Québec, 1900–1915* (Montreal: Les Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1974).
5. According to Herbert J. Lahne, in the United States, "the country's first important manufacturing enterprise to be corporately organized was a cotton mill [in 1813]." Lahne, *The Cotton Mill Worker* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1944), 11. See also Thomas Dublin, Women at Work. *The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826–1860*, ch. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).
6. William Lazonick, "Industrial Relations and Technical Change: the Case of the Self-acting Mule," *The Cambridge Journal of Economics* 3 (1979): 236.
7. This was the position of Cardinal E.-A. Taschereau, the Archbishop of Quebec, whose written submission to the Royal Commission on the Relations of Labor and Capital (1889) stated that he had no objection to the employment of women and children provided that neither their health nor their morals were endangered. See Greg Kealey, *Canada Investigates Industrialism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 300–01.
8. For a discussion of the employment patterns of French-Canadian wives in Manchester, N.H., see Tamara Hareven, *Family Time and Industrial Time. The Relationship Between the Family and Work in a New England Industrial Community*, ch. 8–9 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
9. Delegates attending the 1939 convention of the Confédération des travailleurs catholiques du Canada passed a resolution calling for government restrictions on the employment of all women. ("Procès-verbal", 1939, 147).
10. This tendency was clearly illustrated in various pieces of evidence collected by the Royal Commisssion of Enquiry into the Textile Industry (1936). See, for example, National Archives of Canada, RG 33/20, vol. 50, "Mémoire", 137.
11. *Census of Canada*, 1931, vol. 7, 110–11; ibid., 1941, vol. 7, 694–95.
12. See, for example, *La Presse*, 2 février 1900.
13. *Le Fileur*, vol. 1, no. 8 (June 1907).