

Review of: Michael Dawson, *Selling Out or Buying In? Debating Consumerism in Vancouver and Victoria, 1945-1985*. Toronto, ON: [University of Toronto Press](#), 2018. xii+215 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth; ISBN 9781487512201, Cdn. \$70.00, Paper, ISBN 9781487521868, Cdn. \$27.95.

In *Selling Out or Buying In? Debating Consumerism in Vancouver and Victoria, 1945-1985*, Michael Dawson uses a seemingly mundane topic – the debate over store opening hours in B.C. – to show just how entrenched the culture of consumption became in postwar Canada. He argues that the ongoing disputes over whether stores should be allowed to be open on Wednesdays or Sundays were related to much broader debates about the nature of leisure time, the ability of the state to regulate the economy, the role of women in the workforce, and the place of religion in public life. Focusing on Vancouver and Victoria, Dawson demonstrates that Canadian consumers increasingly expected almost unlimited access to goods and services. This sense that consumers should have the freedom to shop whenever and wherever they liked had a cost for retailers and clerks, who would no longer be able to protect their own leisure time from the encroachment of work. Dawson shows the complicated and shifting alliances between organized labour, consumer groups, retailers, and local and provincial politicians as they contemplated changes that profoundly reshaped the relationship between Canadians and the market.

The book is organized thematically, with initial chapters covering the evolution of store hour restriction and debates about community interests and tourism. Dawson explores the role of chain stores in the Canadian retail landscape, the challenges in enforcement of bylaws and regulations at the municipal and provincial levels, and the gendering of discussions of shopping, work and leisure. He concludes with a chapter placing discussions of consumption and freedom into the larger context of the Cold War, and a tracing of the final decline of Sunday shopping restrictions in the 1970s and 1980s. The thematic approach undoubtedly allows Dawson to delve deeper into patterns of language while it permits readers to zero in on specific issues of interest like business regulation or the discussion of female leisure time. At times this lends a somewhat repetitive quality to the work, as the reader is walked back through the chronology of the shopping debates in order for Dawson to highlight a new angle.

The book serves as a useful reminder that the “shopping context” we know today – a world where consumption occurs around the clock and in every conceivable public and private space – was not natural or inevitable. In the 1950s, retailers in British Columbia were routinely closed not only on Sundays, the traditional day of rest and Christian reflection, but on Wednesdays and evenings. Store employees enjoyed a full or half-day midweek holiday to spend with their families and recover from the pressures of standing behind the till. Vancouver held a plebiscite in 1954 over whether to extend shopping hours to six days a week, and it was not until the 1970s and 1980s that Sundays became possible days of business for shopkeepers. Dawson highlights the language and metaphors mobilized by advocates and critics of shopping deregulation: both sides spoke of “protecting” women, either as female clerks who were forced to endure long hours standing behind counters or housewives who would benefit from extended time to spend with their families shopping together. In the context of the Cold War, Dawson argues, debates over store hours were linked to larger questions of citizenship and democracy. Retailers and consumers appropriated the rhetoric of free enterprise and the rights of individuals in surprising ways, arguing both for and against the expansion of store hours.

For business historians, the book offers a case study of how regulation of trade involves competing jurisdictions, and a closer view of the messy patchwork of municipal, provincial and federal rules that governed Canadian retailers. Dawson demonstrates the legal loopholes and lapses in enforcement which enabled merchants to evade regulation. City and provincial officials themselves expressed frustration at the confusing regulations, like the bylaw which permitted drugstores to stay open while hardware stores were forced to close, despite the fact that the stores carried some common lines of merchandise. Tourist-friendly Victoria might permit the sale of souvenirs to American visitors on a Wednesday, but just what constituted a souvenir was open to debate. Dawson also raises important questions about labour, and how retail clerks could be envisioned as both workers and consumers in modern Canada. The positions of players in the debate were not always predictable: we might expect that all retailers hoped to expand their hours to maximize profits, but at some moments merchants and clerks came together to oppose regulation, and in at least one instance, an employee of Woodward's department store argued that he would welcome extended hours and the chance for more shifts, even as store management organized against open shopping hours.

Dawson uses newspapers as his main source to track the debates over store hours, with some limited supplementation by archival materials. Not surprisingly, he examines journalistic coverage of protests about store hours, city council meetings where changes to local bylaws were discussed, and letters to the editor. Dawson argues that newspapers provided really the only consistent evidence of the evolution of debates over shop hours, and by reading against the grain he is best able to explore the contested language and cultural assumptions which underlay the fight over store-hour restrictions. Given this emphasis on newspapers, it would be nice to have more information about the four major dailies that formed the basis of his analysis – their readership, editorial politics, influential editors or columnists. In particular, it might have been useful for Dawson to more fully explore the advertising regularly appearing in the papers, as local retailers and department stores would have been the bread and butter of newspaper ad revenue during this time period. Dawson is correct in suggesting that newspapers were “less likely to solicit the opinions of those with little interest in shopping, or in shopping policies.” (14) He could go further in exploring just how central support from retailers would have been to area news outlets, and how difficult it would have been for the papers to resist efforts of local merchants to advocate for their own particular interests.

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