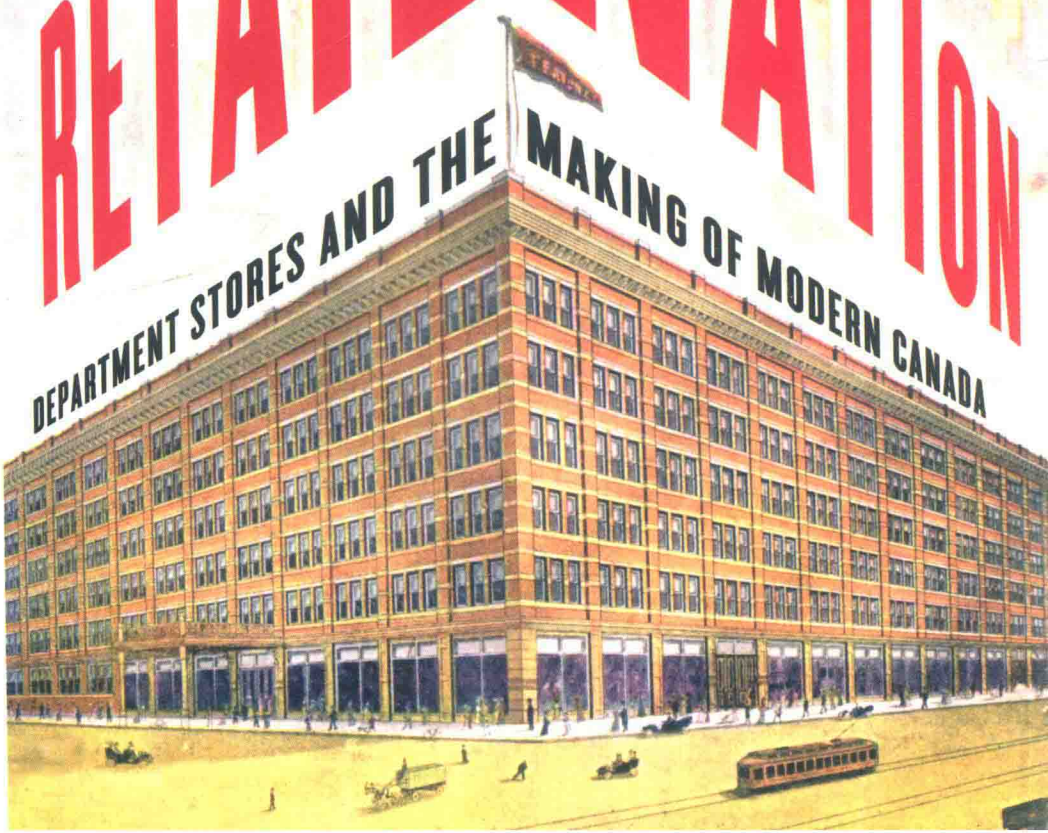
—DONICA BELISLE—

# RETAIL NATION

## DEPARTMENT STORES AND THE MAKING OF MODERN CANADA



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*Department Stores and the Making of Modern Canada*

Donica Belisle



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# Retail Nation

*Millions in merchandise. Cheapness unmeasured.*
*They bring happiness.*

*– Simpson's Department Store, 1896*

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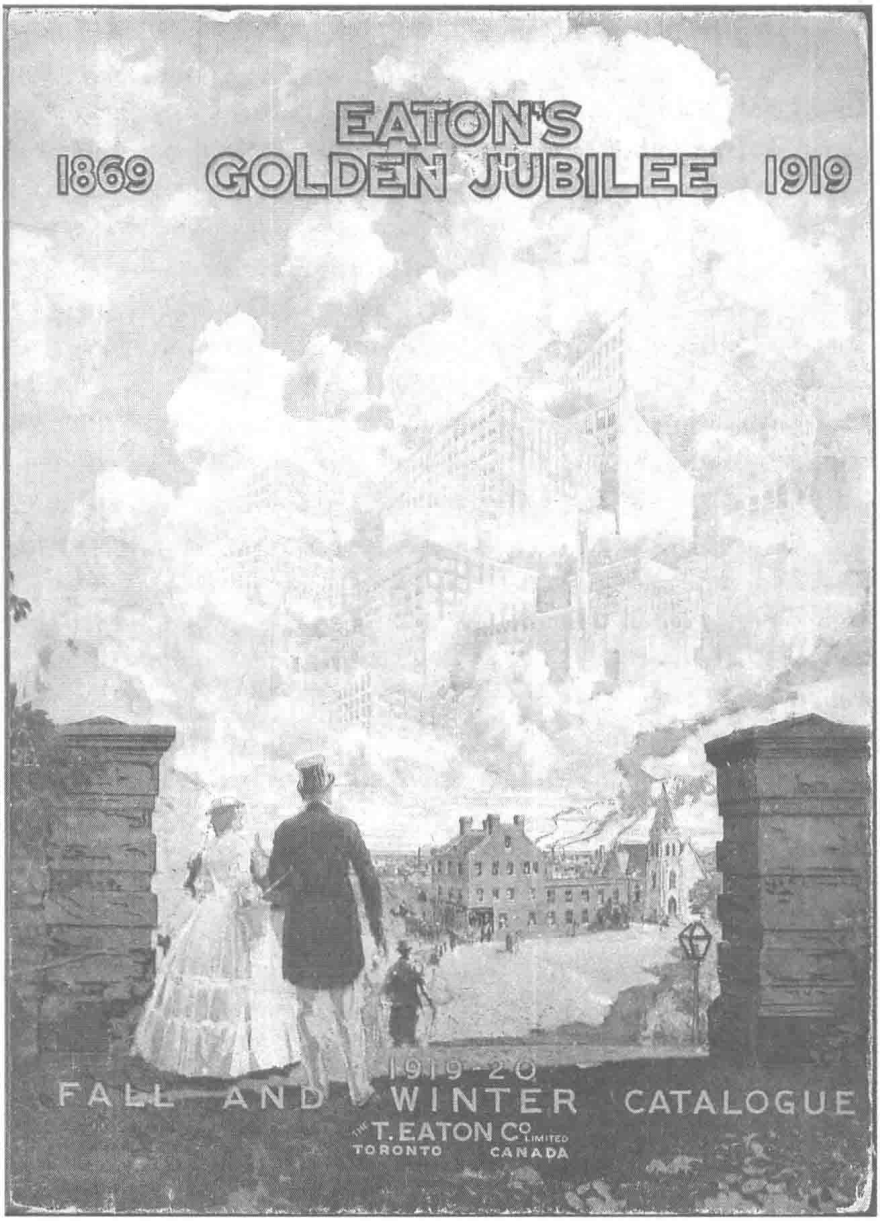


FIGURE 0.1 "Dreams That Have Come True" (cover of Eaton's 1919-20 Fall and Winter Catalogue) | Used with permission of Sears Canada Inc.

# *Introduction*
## Canadian Consumer Society

*This is emphatically an age of PROGRESS. The golden age is before us, not behind, and those who're unwilling to keep up with the procession will have the decency to STAND ASIDE.*

*– Eaton's advertisement, 1892*

THE COVER OF THE Eaton's Fall and Winter Catalogue of 1919-20 was a sight to behold (Figure 0.1). Titled "Dreams That Have Come True," it represented symbolically the modernization that had occurred between 1869, the year Eaton's was founded, and 1919, Eaton's fiftieth anniversary. It proclaimed loudly that progress had been made. Yet what kind of progress? During the first decades of the twentieth century, the types of buildings depicted in the clouds (sites of commerce, industry, retail, and government) were common to all of Canada's urbanizing areas, but only in Montréal and Toronto were they present in large numbers. The cover thus suggests that readers should be pleased with the growth of capitalism, industry, merchandising, and the state, and that they should be happy these institutions made their homes in southern Québec and Ontario. Even more central to "Dreams" is the idea of the progressive nature of retail. One of the largest stores in the British Commonwealth, Eaton's was Canada's biggest retailer. Bringing the wares of progress to the corners of the dominion, it brought Canadians into modernity.

Between the 1880s and the 1920s, the growth of cities, industry, the state, and capitalism transformed Canada into a modern nation. Historians have paid substantial attention to some aspects of modernization, especially urbanization, industrialization, and the expansion of the federal government. Still underexplored, though, are the ways mass merchandising changed Canadian life during this time. Canada is today saturated

with advertising and commodities, but the emergence of mass consumer capitalism, and the consequences this would have, have yet to be fully examined. This book brings the history of Canadian consumer society to the centre stage by investigating Canadians' relationships with Canada's largest department stores. Between 1890 and 1940, Eaton's, Simpson's, and the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) became Canada's biggest retailers. The pages that follow look closely at their activities. They also touch on the histories of such major regional stores as Woodward's and Spencer's in British Columbia and Morgan's and the Dupuis Frères in Québec. Department stores were not the first retailers to utilize modern merchandising methods, but they were the first to employ them to reap unprecedented profits. All the big stores experimented successfully with aggressive capitalist accumulation, bureaucratization, the employment of women, the creation of feminine consumer spaces, bulk buying, and low prices. These characteristics made them symbols of Canadian modernity, as did the stores' assertions that their goods and services would enhance democratic life, strengthen the Canadian nation, and create citizen fulfillment.

The study of department stores offers particularly insightful pathways into modern consumer society because the stores were active in all three realms of the marketplace, namely, production, distribution, and consumption. They purchased manufactured goods, they processed their own commodities, they advertised and sold merchandise and services, and they organized shopping according to modern innovations. By examining department stores' activities in production, distribution, and consumption, historians can gain new perspectives on separate developments within these realms, as well as pinpoint the effects of the commodity's movement among them. They can gain insight into the experiences of people who produced commodities, sold commodities, bought commodities, and criticized mass retail. And, as it highlights employees', consumers', and critics' thoughts and actions, department store research can illuminate how Canadians worked and lived through the rise of modern consumerism.

An enduring debate exists within consumer historiography. Is consumption evidence of manipulation? Are consumers tricked by advertisers into buying ever increasing numbers of useless commodities? Or is consumption evidence of liberation, in that individuals can choose freely from a range of different commodities, using them to enhance their well-being and express their identity? Consumer historians generally agree that the origins of this debate can be traced to mid-twentieth-century arguments

about what leftists referred to as the false needs of consumer capitalism. According to some writers, commodities lulled citizens into complacency. Most famously, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1944) argued that consumption was a tool of "mass deception," wielded by capitalists consolidating their reigns. Variations of the consumerism-as-manipulation theory dominated critical thought on capitalism throughout the 1960s, even appearing in Betty Friedan's famed *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), whose major premise was that advertisers tricked women into believing their proper role was happy consumers of domestic goods.[1]

Portrayals of consumers as dupes produced a major backlash in the 1970s. As early as 1971, as Canadian historians Cynthia Wright and Joy Parr both note, American feminist Ellen Willis argued that women's consumer activities were not unconscious manipulation, but conscious labour. "One of a woman's jobs in this society," Willis wrote, "is to be an attractive sexual object, and clothes and makeup are tools of the trade." According to Willis, women's purchasing of domestic goods was one of their household responsibilities, and most assuredly work as well.[2] By the early 1980s, some cultural theorists were arguing that consumers did not necessarily use goods in ways that advertisers intended; in their efforts to express their individuality or group identity, consumers could use commodities to make, as Parr puts it in her analysis of research on youth cultures in Margaret Thatcher's England, "fabulous and carnivalesque recuperations for their own purposes." In the 1980s and 1990s, scholarly interest in consumer motivation exploded. By the end of the twentieth century, researchers who wished to understand more about how and when Western consumerism emerged, why people consume, and how they express themselves through consumption had a wide range of works to consult, of which the most compelling remain those by American authors Susan Porter Benson, Kathy Peiss, and Nan Enstad.[3]

In their quest to understand consumers' motivations, as well as to rescue consumers from the condescension of intellectual theorists and cultural critics, none of the historians of the 1980s and 1990s depicted consumption as completely liberating. The best studies acknowledged that race, class, and gender limited the social power that any one consumer could wield. In spite of a late-twentieth-century nod to the limitations of consumerism, however, at the turn of the twenty-first century scholars started calling for a move beyond the manipulation-liberation debate. Erika Rappaport argues that views of the consumer as passive "cast the consumer

as a feminized victim of masculine (economic) aggression." And yet the "celebratory view of consumption ... adopts entrepreneurial narratives about freedom in the marketplace that have been prevalent both in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries." Rappaport illustrates an alternative approach to consumer history in *Shopping for Pleasure,* in which she shows that business and consumers together turned London's West End into a premiere shopping district at the end of the nineteenth century.[4]

Other publications also chart new paths. Using what Joy Parr terms a "third, less dichotomous" method,[5] these works suggest through their own rich examples that consumer society should be portrayed not in a one-sided manner that stresses either capitalism's hegemony or consumers' agency, but as a multifaceted phenomenon that involves a range of historical agents. Among the most sophisticated of these studies are Parr's *Domestic Goods* (1999), Lizabeth Cohen's *A Consumer's Republic* (2003), and Victoria de Grazia's *Irresistible Empire* (2005). Together, their research demonstrates that consumer society unfolded after the Second World War as a complex interplay among business, the state, and consumers, with various other groups such as lobbyists and product designers intervening. Borrowing a phrase from Foucault, de Grazia aptly describes this method as "cutting across societies on the diagonal."[6] This technique avoids simplistic depictions of consumers as either passive or liberated and allows for explorations of the historical agents involved in consumer capitalism. It further illuminates power relations among those groups.[7]

Their authors might not explicitly state that they take this third, multifaceted approach, but recent Canadian books can also be viewed in these terms. Karen Dubinsky's *The Second Greatest Disappointment* (1999), Valerie Korinek's *Roughing It in the Suburbs* (2000), Craig Heron's *Booze* (2003), Suzanne Morton's *At Odds* (2003), Jarrett Rudy's *The Freedom to Smoke* (2005), and Steve Penfold's *The Donut* (2008) all focus on the history of a particular industry or commodity – Niagara Falls, gambling, *Chatelaine* magazine, alcohol, tobacco, and donuts, respectively – and explore it over a specific time period. These publications document the beliefs and actions of past distributors and consumers, and some examine the power dynamics of distributor-consumer interactions. Parr's *Domestic Goods* (1999), which consciously applies this new, third approach, offers the most sustained exploration of government policy on consumption. Putting domestic goods consumption in broader political, economic, and cultural context, she shows that production, distribution, and consumption are mutually dependent.[8]

It is in this spirit of complexity that this book is situated. Instead of focusing on a particular commodity-centred industry, though, it explores the rise of mass retail. Between 1890 and 1940, department stores were among the most powerful agents of Canadian modernization. Companies such as Eaton's, Simpson's, and the HBC helped revolutionize the ways Canadians thought about and experienced shopping, living standards, and goods. An examination of these department stores' activities, together with consumers', workers', governments', and critics' responses, yields invaluable insights into the emergence of consumer capitalism in northern North America. This study demonstrates that corporate monopolies wielded a tremendous amount of power in the consumer marketplace, but it also reveals that governments, consumers, retail employees, and anti-retailing activists influenced the direction and character of modern Canadian consumption.

Chapter 1 documents Canada's largest stores' retailing ascendancy and situates it in an international context. Unlike department stores in Great Britain and the United States, between 1890 and 1940 Canadian department stores monopolized the Canadian retailing market. In 1930 alone, just three department stores – Eaton's, Simpson's, and the HBC – earned 14 out of every 100 dollars spent in the country. Yet Canadian department stores did not build their empires through sheer determination alone. As Monod reminds us, "innovations in marketing did not happen without the stimulus of demand."[9] To flesh out why department stores were able to construct such colossal enterprises, this chapter also tracks the changes in demand that occurred in Canada during this period.

An oft-made connection between department stores and Canadian national identity is taken up in Chapter 2, which argues that the voluminous publicity of Eaton's, Simpson's, the HBC, and other department stores forged links between mass retail and Canadian heritage. Eaton's catalogues in particular helped define what it meant to be a citizen of the modern Canadian nation. Showing that department stores' publicity portrayed the stores, their commodities, and their consumers in nationalist, gendered, racialized, and classed forms, this chapter reveals that department stores defined modern Canadian life as consumerist, middle class, and white.

Chapter 3 investigates department stores' strategies of customer and labour management and finds that retailers used paternalism to manage relations in both these realms, bringing both the best and worst of paternalism into the twentieth century. Canadian department stores' particular brand of paternalism entailed treating customers and employees benevo-