

***The Christmas Imperative: Leisure, Family and Womert's Work.* By Leslie Bella. (Halifax: Femwood, 1992. Pp. 252)**

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[See table of contents](#)

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beginning in the early 1940s. Meticulously, O'Leary chronicles the early development of the schooner, the evolution of its hull shape and rigging and the methods and materials used in its construction. He further describes the use of the schooner in the local fishery, in rum running during Prohibition, and in the coasting trade of agricultural produce from Tancook Island to Halifax. This approach gives the Tancook Schooner a contextual depth unparalleled by any small craft in Atlantic Canada with the possible exception of the Banks dory. For this O'Leary deserves much credit.

With the exception of a half model or sail plan, the principal source of information usually associated with any traditional boat type is oral history. Although O'Leary has strived to balance this information with other sources, it is evident, however, he relies heavily upon the memories of Thomas Mason and Murray A. Mason. Anyone citing information in the book should be cognizant that oral history inevitably suffers from the vagaries of human memory, particularly when specific details are involved. One assumes the related interviews with the Stevens, Levis, and Langilles were used to substantiate their recollections.

More specific criticisms relate to editorial weaknesses and omissions. In the case of the former, the reduced size of the lines plans make them difficult to read. Similarly, the list of vessels in the appendix should have been alphabetized for easier use.

While it is also tempting to suggest O'Leary should have compared the Tancook Schooner to other contemporary craft, it is abundantly clear this was not possible due to a lack of comparable information. Anyone attempting to redress this lamentable situation, however, should take O'Leary's approach and view the boat as a cultural artifact, documenting it in a similar scholarly and comprehensive fashion. O'Leary has set a standard that others would do well to emulate.

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The Christmas Imperative: Leisure, Family and Women's Work. By
Leslie Bella. (Halifax: Fernwood, 1992. Pp. 252)

Conventional definitions of Christmas as a holiday, framed in terms of leisure and celebration, ignore the massive amount of female labour which underpins the season. Notwithstanding the importance of Christmas in terms of symbolizing, reaffirming and reinforcing bonds between family members and

friends, such happiness requires work. When seen critically, Christmas is really a female work project. Although it is a project which appears to be voluntary, Christmas is better understood as a complex of external and internal organized forces which push women to “do” Christmas—forces which Leslie Bella calls the “Christmas imperative.”

In *The Christmas Imperative: Leisure, Family and Women's Work*, Bella (a Professor of Social Work at Memorial University) sets out to show how and why women cooperate with the Christmas imperative. Motivated by questions of history and politics, and drawing on her own contradictory experiences of “unsuccessful” Christmases, Bella promises to “explain the origins, describe the impact and promote the transformation” (p. 12) of this Christmas imperative.

Although the book began as a critique of the androcentrism of leisure theory, prompted by Bella's thesis that “family leisure” was really “women's work,” it goes much further. The book is organized around two interrelated themes: an analysis of social reproduction (the importance of women's caring work); a feminist critique of “familism” (a rejection of the anti-social nuclear family). Unlike much of the literature on social reproduction which tends to economism, in Bella's presentation the Christmas imperative has an intensely *subjective* as well as economic dimension.

As Bella explains, the Christmas imperative drives women to reproduce—for their male kin and children—their own magical memories of girlhood Christmases, built on the work of mothers, grandmothers and other female relatives. But because childhood wonder cannot be recaptured, each Christmas is destined to be at least a small disappointment even though women are prohibited from acknowledging this. “As women,” she writes, “we are haunted by the residue of familism and convinced that the reproduction of Christmas, with all that that implies, is our responsibility. It can be no one else's, and that is why we experience the Christmas imperative with such an exquisite combination of joy and pain” (p. 232). The internal pressure women place on themselves and other women is compounded by, and helps to legitimize, the “Christmas pushers”: commercial interests (retailers, especially large department stores), advertisers, women's magazines, the media and other institutions (in which religion, curiously, figures little) which profit from Christmas.

Christmas, when performed successfully, has a number of effects beyond the obviously commercial: it confirms family identity and domestic felicity, it allows Christian families to resonate with the purity of the “Holy Family,” and it reassures participants of their place in a lineage of care and tradition. These personalistic effects are presented as the “core” of the Christmas imperative, although Bella is equally clear that commercial and economic interests organize the season as the “central celebration of contemporary capitalism” (p. 51).

The strength of the book, however, is not so much its theoretical contribution as its rich description of the contemporary and historical “production” of Christmas. In this respect, Bella’s use of sources is innovative—blending fiction, historiography, diaries, archival ephemera and oral histories to present a compelling picture of how women struggle to make a “successful” Christmas for themselves and their families. Women’s testimonies of their Christmas experiences show the holiday from its most shining to its most agonizing. Bella allows women’s first-person narratives to carry her argument. I was filled with empathetic exhaustion as I read women’s descriptions of their struggles to (re)create family traditions and rituals to demonstrate their love and care. Simultaneously, painful stories of dislocation, immigration, alcoholism and distress show that the Christmas imperative is no mere socialization to be lightly tossed away. The misery of a “failed” Christmas is all too real—it is a season, after all, in which suicide rates reportedly rise.

The heart of *The Christmas Imperative* is several chapters of social history about Christmas. Bella explores the “invention” of Christmas in the 19th and early 20th century, via a joyous romp through Victorian fiction meshed with political and cultural analysis. These chapters are filled with rich gems: pagan Saturnalian roots, the rise of a Christmas-card empire, the popularization of carols and “traditional” songs, the curious history of Santa Claus parades, the crucial role of retailers (including Canada’s own Eaton’s), women’s periodicals and more. I was fascinated to learn that Christmas was not originally feminized in the holiday spectacle conceived by Washington Irving, Charles Dickens and their contemporaries—all of which centred on male characters. Feminization, according to Bella, began in the late 1800s (and the popular girls’ book *Little Women* occupies an explanatory place of honour), but it was not until the 20th century that women and Christmas were cemented together in an apparently natural bond.

Bella takes pains to distinguish *Christmas* from the *Christmas imperative*—and it is testimony to the power of the imperative that this distinction cannot always be maintained successfully. While her suggestions on how to transform the holiday to eliminate the Christmas imperative are the least successful element of the book, being prescriptive and sketchy, Bella is motivated by an important ethical concern. Bella writes that children (and I would add, adult women) “deserve golden memories to carry into their futures, but not ones that embody familist prescriptions” (p. 49). Paradoxically, by transforming the holiday to challenge its sexism, commercialism and familism, she argues, we can honour family traditions more authentically and be more true to the spirit of Christmas.

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