Laundry, as Arwen Mohun observes in the introduction to *Steam Laundries*, is a problem that refuses to go away; thus the relative lack of literature on the technology and industrialization of laundry work is especially surprising. Mohun has gone a long way toward remedying this deficit with her book.

Mohun, associate professor of history at the University of Delaware, begins by telling us what this book is *not* about; it is not a general history of laundry technique, or the work of women as laundresses. Rather, it is focused on the industrialization of laundry work which occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in America and Great Britain, and the resulting factory organization of laundry work in the form of commercial “steam laundries.”

The book is divided into two parts. Part one provides cultural and historical background on laundry work and the origins of the laundry business between 1880 and 1920. While laundry work remained essentially unchanged until the middle of the nineteenth century, the simultaneous development of machines for washing clothes combined with an emerging Victorian ethic which emphasized cleanliness brought about revolutionary changes in the way washing was done. Entrepreneurs and capitalists opened large commercial laundry facilities that resembled factories in their structure and organization of labor. Mohun explores the gender issues that began to emerge between the predominantly male laundry owners and the largely female work force, and the attempts to unionize the laundry workers.

Part two is focused on the mature phase of the laundry industry, from roughly 1920 to 1940, and its decline with the introduction of the electric washing machine into the middle-class home. Mohun discusses the racial issues that arose in the United States as African-American women began to replace women of European ancestry as laundry workers, and the increasing level of state involvement in both the U.S. and the United Kingdom as governments attempted to regulate wages and working conditions. Finally, Mohun describes the long decline of the industry, which she ascribes primarily to the inability of the laundries to compete against new middle-class cultural norms that emphasized the advantages of doing laundry in the home, and secondarily to the failure of the business to find a “Henry Ford” who could overcome the problem of rising labor costs in order to increase production.

Mohun makes excellent use of the trade journals of the laundry industry as sources, both in providing technical detail on the laundry business itself, and as a means of exploring the attitudes of the laundry owners toward their employees. The pages of these journals reveal a preoccupation with gender roles among the male laundry managers, perhaps indicative of underlying anxieties about their presence in a traditionally female occupation. Unfortunately, there is little corresponding narrative from the viewpoint of the women who worked in the laundries. While the journal material is effective,
the book would also have benefitted from more first-
person accounts, perhaps oral histories from retired laun-
dry workers and managers.

One aspect of the work which I found particularly in-
triguing was the way in which steam laundries first fol-
lowed, and then diverged from, the standard pattern of
industrialization in factories, and the unanticipated effect
that the introduction of electricity had on them. Early
on, the author mentions Ruth Schwartz Cowan’s descrip-
tion of the steam laundry as a “technological road not
taken,” due to its failure to lure consumers away from do-
ing laundry at home.[1] Mohun’s analysis suggests both
technological and cultural reasons for the victory of the
home washing machine over the commercial laundry.
Like other nineteenth-century factories, steam laundries
started out using belt-driven washing machines running
from a series of overhead drive spindles; as David Nye
has shown, factories improved their efficiency by mount-
ing electric motors directly on machines, eliminating the
need for drive belts.[2]

However, unlike the power loom or the turret lathe,
adding an electric motor to the washing machine created
the possibility of migrating the technology out of the fac-
tory and into the home; all that was needed was an ad-
vertising campaign on the part of electrical manufactur-
ers to create consumer acceptance. (There is a surprising
parallel here with the computer industry; the refinement
of integrated circuit technology enabled the mainframe
computer to be shrunk to the size of the personal com-
puter, which was then able to migrate out of the indus-
trial computer room and into the home.)

Perhaps the most important aspect of the book is Mo-
hun’s analysis of gendered relationships in all aspects
of the laundry industry. Gender roles played a signifi-
cant part in the relationships of managers to workers, of
workers to union leaders, and in the marketing of laun-
dry technology to consumers. The reader is frequently
surprised at the relative rigidity of gender roles in the in-
dustry; while their British counterparts were somewhat
more lenient, the male leadership of the American Laun-
drymen’s National Association would at first not admit
women as members, or even invite spouses to annual
meetings.(p. 58)

As in other areas of women’s work, Mohun observes
that attempts to unionize the laundry workers met with
mixed success; the single-sex unions formed in England
in the late nineteenth century were short-lived and spo-
radic, and the male-dominated American Federation of
Labor unions in the United States often failed to support
the interests of their female members. One notable ex-
ception to this rule was the militancy of the shirt collar
laundresses of Troy, New York, whose union activities re-
ceived the full support of the male ironworker’s union; it
is interesting to speculate on the reasons for the unique
success of unionization in Troy. Perhaps close ties of kin-
ship and ethnicity among the predominantly Irish work-
ers of Troy played a role.[3]

Mohun provides an interesting study of the adver-
tising campaign waged by the washing machine manu-
facturers as they began to compete with the steam laun-
dries in the 1920s and 1930s, and the gendered messages
used by both sides to appeal to women consumers. While
washing machine manufacturers emphasized the domes-
tic virtues of doing the wash at home, the laundry owners
emphasized the hazards of women working with com-
plicated machinery. Women consumers were alternately
depicted as “acquisitive, emotional, frivolous, and house-
proud” in advertising campaigns.(p. 264)

Mohun’s book is a welcome contribution to a much-
neglected area and will be of interest to historians of tech-
nology, women’s work, and nineteenth century indus-
trialization. While her book does much to answer fund-
damental questions, it also raises questions for further
study; it would be interesting to know more about Chi-
nese laundries and laundry workers, for example, and
how they managed to survive in a highly competitive
market while enduring ethnic discrimination. By ana-
lyzing the intersections of technology, gender, and work,
Mohun has created a solid basis for further scholarship in
a variety of areas.

Notes


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