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Out of the Shadows: The T. Eaton Company and Women's Sport

The early twentieth century saw the emergence of the New Woman as thousands of young women entered male preserves in the pursuit of education, waged labour, and physical activities on the playing fields of Canada. This influx of active women gave rise to the Golden Age of Canadian women's sports, a period from approximately 1920 until the late 1930s and the outbreak of World War II, during which Canadian women, and Canada as a nation, enjoyed phenomenal international success at the Olympics and in basketball. Much has been made of the sporting careers of individuals such as Bobbie Rosenfeld, Ethel Catherwood, and teams such as the Edmonton Grads and the Matchless Six of the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics. Despite extensive media coverage of these successes, little consideration has been given to the environments which produced these athletes. Many of them came out of industrial recreation leagues and/or secured corporate sponsorship for their training and competition. The industrial recreation leagues and company sponsored sports, in addition to facilitating the careers of prominent Canadian athletes, were among the most important sites of sport and leisure activities for working-class females. While some research has been carried out in this area in the United States and England, little is known about industrial leagues and company sports in the Canadian context.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the nature of company sponsored sport as leisure activities for working-class women in Canada. The essay explores the T. Eaton Company, a leading Canadian department store and a major employer of women, and its

provision of sporting activities to female employees. Drawing from employee newsletters, magazines, and other company records, and focusing on the time period of Golden Age of women's sport in Canada, this study examines the nature and extent of sports offered through the T. Eaton Company. Specifically, it considers the entrepreneurial role of the company's founder, Timothy Eaton, in relationship to the provision of sporting opportunities. This relationship is set in the social context of the period, particularly with respect to prevailing beliefs regarding women's physicality, and against the backdrop of Eaton's overall humanitarian attitude regarding the welfare of his employees. Additional consideration is given to the meaning of these sporting opportunities for the participants. Conclusions drawn relate to the implication of such activities for the employees, specifically, and women's sport in Canada, in general, and the uniqueness of Timothy Eaton's role.