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Masculinity in Postwar Canada
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Introduction: The Manly Modern

If you wanted a postcard image of mid-twentieth-century high modernism, you could do a lot worse than Fraser Wilson’s majestic mural of an imagined British Columbia. Painted in 1947, it is clearly looking over its shoulder at the realist murals of the 1930s with a great relief that times have changed, work and industry have returned, depression and war are ended, and progress is finally possible. The colours are brighter, the drudgery reduced, and the signs of progress more pronounced. It is all there: the triumphant and thorough control of the natural world, nature turned into bounty, cleanly, efficiently, through work that is tough and rugged but completely manageable. Everything is connected, from mines and forests to harbours and factories. There is no danger here, only risk, well planned for and skillfully supervised. Of course, this mural is a working man’s modernism. The skyscrapers are in the background, and the managers, scientists, entrepreneurs, and engineers are absent. Instead, we see mine and machine, logger and welder, hard-working men cutting, drilling, and driving forward progress. Middle-class men had their own murals in these years: newspaper stories, radio broadcasts, celebratory books that told of their role in making possible this brave, new, and expertly planned world. But whether they told of scientists or lumberjacks, threshing machines or social surveys, images of postwar high modernism, Wilson’s mural included, had one thing in common: men.
In the mural, this is fairly easy to see because there is no alternative: there are no women. All of the movers and makers of progress – miners, lumberjacks, welders, and fishers – are men. But the plot goes much further than the people in central casting. The mural’s real stars are its ideas: the belief in the rational control of nature, in the possibilities of planned progress, and in the skilful transformation of dangers into manageable risks. And it is these ideas that are gendered. For much of the history of technocratic modernity, many of its key values – expertise, instrumental reason, stoical self-control – have been understood to be masculine. Between the end of the Second World War and the late 1960s, the importance of these gendered ideas grew substantially. The two terms – masculinity and modernity – could have been used almost synonymously in many incantations. In taking up his high-modernist vision, then, Wilson’s mural not only extolled workers and the idea of progress, but also pushed into the limelight a particular style of masculinity that shared the modernist traits of reasoned and expert control. This book is an exploration of this profoundly important, yet often overlooked, historical link between masculinity and modernity in post-war Canada.

The timing is key. The ideal of the manly modern came into prominence in these years because of a set of historically specific circumstances with two major components: first, the success of the technocratic structures and values of industrial modernity in establishing themselves as the status quo in Canadian living; and second, the desire to reaffirm gender divisions after the flux of depression and war and in light of the relative lessening importance of other patriarchal controls in the family and economy. In other words, the manly modern ideal fitted nicely into an increasingly modernized Canada in which patriarchal privilege had been shorn of some of its more traditional supports. In this context, those who linked ideal masculinity with the benefits of modern technology and progress provided contemporary justifications for gender hierarchies that were under threat. They updated patriarchy.

Manly modernism took on a renewed significance in these years, but it was not new. The belief in men’s greater rationality goes back at least to the Greeks, and as Robert Connell notes, it “is a deep-seated assumption of European philosophy.” From this perspective, men’s alleged ability to objectively assess situations and themselves and to coolly make decisions has made them everything from great leaders to brilliant scientists. The always assumed counterpoint, even if unspoken, is the illogical and potentially hysterical woman, or in more positive renditions, the intuitive and emotional but ultimately less rational woman. While
this relationship is sometimes presented as being complementary, it has nonetheless frequently been invoked to justify gender inequality. The importance of reason and rational efficiency to post-Enlightenment and especially industrial societies has meant that this patriarchal notion has become increasingly important since at least the eighteenth century. There is, however, something particularly important about how the idea of rational man came to be invoked in postwar Canada.

For those eager to bolster the power of masculinity in the postwar years, this connection between the manly and the modern could not have been more propitious. The postwar years represented the high point of the modernist project in Canada, the time when affluence, scientific development, and the emerging welfare state combined to make it seem as though Canadians could manipulate the environment for the ever greater social good. A slew of experts took on more and more significant roles in shaping the economy and society. Undoubtedly, the process had begun much earlier, but it reached its apex with the Second World War and its aftermath. By this time, governments had thoroughly integrated experts into the public service and the political decision-making process. Wartime exigencies accentuated the reliance on experts. As with the Great War, but this time with more rigour, the values of efficiency and planning became watchwords for success. And even after the war, these ideas continued in civilian guises, shaping an expanded welfare state and a Keynesian-tinged economic policy whose backbone was a belief that experts should, and could, shape social processes that only several years earlier had been considered beyond control. In the personal realm, a range of experts, including psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers, took on an even more important role in influencing the mental and cultural processes of the postwar generations. Some Canadians fretted about the excesses of rationality and warned against a too heavy reliance on science at the expense of human values, but their pleas for caution only confirmed the extent to which modern values had become the new normal. When some postwar Canadians linked modern values with masculinity, then, this had the effect of privileging certain kinds of men by linking them with the dominant spirit of the times. At a moment when the modern represented the promise of ultimately controlling risks – whether social, psychological, or economic – masculinity’s connection with the modern simultaneously established the social significance of risk management for men.

The connection between men, modernity, and risk was not new, but given the challenge to other bastions of male authority, these ideas were increasingly drawn upon to boost a flagging set of gender relations. The
years after the Second World War saw a backlash against the threat of gender uncertainty and ambiguity that had been brought on by depression and war. The main facts of this story are fairly well known, but they do bear repeating, as they have not before been connected with changing ideas of gender and modernity. The Great Depression had cast doubt on a number of longstanding beliefs about the natural divisions between the sexes, perhaps the most important being that men were the natural breadwinners in a family. By throwing many Canadian men out of work, the Depression had simultaneously created the conditions for gender anxiety as men and women wondered how – or whether – the “normal” set of family economic roles could be re-established. No sooner had the Depression ended than wartime conditions created new worries. Wartime industry demanded women workers in paid employment, much of it the kind of work that had previously been performed by men. Although every effort went into insisting that such work was feminine, this cultural whitewashing could not completely hide the fact of increased womanly independence and the breakdown of gendered workplace categories previously considered sacrosanct. This social, and gender, tumult was the backdrop to many Canadians’ desire, immediately after the war, that everything should return to normal. It was hoped that Canadians’ pent-up desires to marry and start families could now be realized and that the idealized type of family life, with a male breadwinner and female homemaker, could be re-established. This response was the backlash of a generation too familiar with turbulence. But it was also, on a social and political level, a large-scale re-emphasis on a set of patriarchal values whose force had been diminished.

In this context, the idea of the manly modern provided an explanation of men’s and women’s differences and a powerful justification for inequality. It contained a neat logic of gender distinctions, presenting men’s leading roles in the public sphere as a natural outgrowth of basic proclivities, which was not to say that women could not work but simply that men were better suited by reason of their ingrown capabilities to do many of the most valuable kinds of work. In an age ostensibly devoted to democratic family life and when many of the public signposts of gender difference such as voting restrictions had been removed, the manly modern ideal was appropriately contemporary. Postwar Canadians could look askance at the backward Victorians and their patriarchal families even as they continued to support a quite similar structure of family life. Manly modernism operated on a similar type of logic as the earlier ideal of the Christian gentleman, with its emphasis on manly virtue and stoical repression, but it did so without religious overtones.
The renunciation of the manly modern was mental and secular, not spiritual. In other words, manly modernism was significant in the postwar years because it seemed to provide a convincing and up-to-date justification for a gender system under attack.

In teasing out how manly modernism worked in the postwar years, this book takes a new approach. Previous historians have spent a great deal of time explaining the changing position of men and women in the home and workplace. We know much about how the breadwinner-homemaker family has been both challenged and supported from the 1940s to the present day. What remain to be explored are the other constellations of cultural values that influenced Canadians’ thoughts about gender and how people put these thoughts into practice. In particular, men’s position as family breadwinner – an issue well covered in the historiography – was an important part of postwar masculinity, but the basis for its justification reached far outside the family to cultural beliefs that need much more enquiry. Ironically, in an attempt to compensate for the prejudices of the age, scholarly work on men in the postwar years focuses mainly on men in the home. This book certainly takes men’s position as breadwinner into account, but it also delves into a related but separate gender ideal: that of the manly modern. This book is an attempt to show what happened when manly modernism came into greater prominence – the cultural logic that it embodied, its role in reasserting men’s privileged social position, and ultimately, its unanticipated consequences.

This final issue of manly modernism’s unintended consequences provides the basis for this book’s second main theme and argument. Although the ideal of the reasonable man became ever more important in shoring up patriarchy in these years, the consequences of this support were not always straightforward. Far from being clear-cut sources of power and authority, modernist values and institutions created a sense of alienation in many men. As often as postwar Canadians equated masculinity with modernity, they also, paradoxically, suggested that being modern was antithetical to being masculine. Many critics argued that various features of modern life – from bureaucratic rationality to suburban living – harmed an allegedly primal masculinity; they suggested that men suffered by becoming modern, that they were hard-done-by and thus deserved special treatment. Popular culture represented these concerns in a variety of ways, ranging from the fascination with such anti-responsibility figures as the playboy and the young rebel to the victimization of such stock figures as the beleaguered breadwinner, the mistreated veteran, and the potentially emasculated “Organization
Man.” This approach represented men as modernity’s victims, stretched out upon the altar of progress, baring their chests for the mechanical sacrificial knife.

Where did these attitudes come from? How could modernity be inherently masculine and, at the same time, hurtful to men? The answer lies in two areas: first, in the processes of alienation that are integral to the modernist project; and second, in how this alienation was mapped onto other social hierarchies such as class and race. That modernity creates alienation is widely recognized. The modernist celebration of rationality, efficiency, and control represents an unbalanced selection of human traits and values. When this unbalanced mix came to be ever more thoroughly established in the institutions and processes that affected individual lives, the result was a widespread social disciplining, a shutting off of alternative ways of being human, with the attendant widespread feeling that something primal, some integral part of life, was missing. Marxists capture this well in their discussion of the effects of capitalism on workers. Under capitalism, workers are estranged both from the process of their labour – how it is done, its timing, pace, and quality – and from the end product of their labour, as they have little control over what it achieves. Ultimately, this leads to an estrangement from something essential both in themselves and in their relations with others. While some Marxist scholars claim that alienation needs to be understood as a product primarily of capitalism, this type of alienation is in fact a feature of the modernist project more generally. Everything from large-scale bureaucracy and systems of expertise to rationally planned cities and living spaces has had the unintended consequence of creating a sense of alienation in those moderns who otherwise benefited from these attempts to better plan and control the environment. Alienation was integral to high modernism.

The sense of an alienated modern masculinity grew directly out of this connection between modernity and manhood. As modernist beliefs and practices came to be ever more closely associated with an idealized masculinity, the effect on individual men was contradictory. On the one hand, they benefited en masse by their association with a dominant cultural symbol and by the continued insistence on gender differences. Yet on the other hand, the mechanisms for supporting these gender differences created their own hardships. Manly modernism produced a widespread sense of alienation. It is this alienation that lay at the heart of the postwar ambivalence about the effect of modernity on men.

Alienation was also a kind of resistance. The consequences of modernist alienation were meted out more severely to men already set aside
because of differences of race and class. By defining masculinity’s interests as analogous to those of technology and progress, manly modernism involved a regulation of individual men and groups of men who failed to match up to these standards. Manly modernism privileged rational and expert masculinity even as it sought to control other forms of manly aggression, passion, and the working-class or racial “other.” Middle-class men may have felt some unease about the constrained nature of white-collar work, but working-class men were usually more thoroughly disciplined by workplace regulations that threatened their control over their work and the feelings of competence with which that work was associated. In other words, manly modernism did not uniformly benefit all men, and its side effects were more keenly felt by working-class men and racial minorities.

We need, however, to be careful to see these complaints in their larger context. There is something more to these complaints about modernity than simply resistance or antimodernism. Yes, working-class men – and veterans specifically, to take one example – suffered alienation because of the liberal bias of corporate capitalism that was built into the bureaucratic processes that they were made to navigate. But it was not a universal human alienation. It was an estrangement from the prerogatives of male power. It was an estrangement from the full benefits of male citizenship that would have then placed them above women and other men. The essential point to notice here is that the presumed wholeness that was seen to be lacking implied the possible existence of a more thorough and appropriate gendered society in which men’s worth and competence were adequately rewarded. Manly modernism’s “others” cannot simply be seen as victims – whether of capitalism, the state, or some other modern process – because their complaints arose from their being excluded from power, not from the problems of power in its own right.

Making Sense of Modernity
This book explores both sides of manly modernism – its role in rejuvenating postwar patriarchy and its ambiguous effects on individual men and groups of men – in a series of case studies centred on one city, Vancouver, in the years between 1945 and the late 1960s. In focusing exclusively on Vancouver, this book looks to one of the most important Canadian cities in a period that was increasingly both urban and suburban. In this sense, the experience of those in Vancouver was characteristic of social and economic changes occurring throughout Canada in these years. I do not make an argument for the uniqueness of the Vancouver experience of manly modernism (such an assessment would
need more studies with which to compare the Vancouver experience). Instead, my focus is on a modern culture that was rooted in urban centres like Vancouver and that was increasingly the norm. The earlier twentieth-century dream of a rural Canada based on small independent farmsteads increasingly came to be seen as moribund in these years. Indeed, the transformation to an increasingly urbanized life could not have been clearer: the main source of new migrants to Vancouver in the war years and after was the Prairies. As mechanized and corporate agriculture took over on the Prairies, more and more Prairie residents moved to the cities, particularly to Vancouver. Such trends continued in myriad other areas of life. The power of mass consumer culture in this era – everything from commercialized music to television – meant that new technologies and the corporate messages with which they were imbued needed to be negotiated at an accelerated rate. All of these trends pre-dated the postwar years, but the era’s economic and political stability meant that the process of modernization itself came to be more of a dominant concern. The ideal of the manly modern had a home in this modern urbanized Canada, where large corporations and institutions were increasingly the norm, where individuals’ daily lives were more bound up in corporate and government structures of management, entertainment, and expertise, and where these trends were both celebrated and fretted over.

What did it mean to be modern in postwar Vancouver? In the first instance, the discussion of modernity must be more description than definition. The most obvious beginning is with the war, with the emphasis on planning and efficiency, with centralized controls on labour, production, prices, and myriad other aspects of daily life. Here, the possibilities of, and belief in, control were essential. But the call to action did not merely come from the exigencies of wartime, although the urgency of national peril made the desire for modernist schemes that much more pressing. As other historians have shown, the culture of planning that flowered in the war years had been tended through the early years of the twentieth century. It took root with the progressive impulse of the social gospel before and during the Great War; it sprouted in the growing role of the practical sciences in both public life and the universities in the 1920s; and it grew to adolescence dealing with the seemingly insoluble problems of the Depression in the following decade. Before this, capitalists added their own contribution, improving techniques of workplace control and efficiency through the schemes of Frederick Winslow Taylor’s scientific management and carefully formulated systems of corporate paternalism meant to create a more pliable
workforce. And we must not forget the many attempts to create order out of the social chaos wrought by industrial capitalism. In this sense, the ancestors of wartime planning and efficiency were many and included the industrial exhibitions of the nineteenth century that sought to assure Canadians of the ultimate beneficence of capital; they were the urban planners who attempted to create more rational and rule-bound cities; and they included Depression-era leftists who saw the answers to economic problems in comprehensive state planning.

The high modernism of the postwar years clearly did not emerge out of a vacuum; its singularity lay in the longstanding period of economic boom that allowed the promises of previous years to become the realities of the present. After the war, Canadians retreated from much of the emphasis on hyper-efficiency that had characterized the war years, but a widespread belief in the possibilities and benefits of control remained. This was reflected in a variety of ways. Partly, it meant managing economic and social life through the welfare state, and a host of new programs came into place, including the Veterans Charter, family allowances (1944), a new old-age pension (1951), and hospital insurance (1957). This was all part of what might be called a “new liberalism,” one that had been forced to give up slightly on its laissez-faire values in the face of political challenges from the left. It subsequently found a home in modest calls for some kinds of social and economic controls, if only to prevent an even more radical alternative. The preventive nature of the new liberalism can clearly be seen in the way that control figured in another area of the period’s political culture: Cold War politics. Here, dominant elements in the political culture stressed the need to contain the alleged communist menace both abroad and at home. The rationality of the manly modern was often in this way a statement of capitalist liberal values, a presumed difference from the irrational and authoritarian communist. In the realm of technology, efforts to tame the natural environment were evident in the completion of several megaprojects, most notably the deepening of the St. Lawrence Seaway and Newfoundland’s Churchill Falls hydroelectric project. When these diverse strands were combined with such developments as the democratization of car ownership and technological transformations in the workplace, there was seemingly good reason to believe that the social and natural environment could be continuously manipulated as a matter of course. Although high modernism predated these years, the postwar era saw its consolidation as the nation’s dominant ideology.

The postwar modernist project in British Columbia mirrored national trends, albeit in a radicalized fashion. The still frontier-like conditions
in much of the province in 1945 gave British Columbia’s version of high modernism a revolutionary shine. It was not so much that modernization occurred differently in British Columbia as it was that there was such a short distance between the premodern and the modern, between the absence and the shocking presence of industry, urbanization, and technological development. Building on the strength of wartime prosperity and continuing from the same conditions after the war, the province’s population grew from just over 800,000 in 1941 to more than 2 million in 1971. Economically, governments, corporations, and unions emphasized planned and sustained growth. In a province so broken up by mountains and water, governments considered transportation initiatives to be the main impetus to development. Earlier governments had placed great importance on transportation, but the postwar governments of John Hart (1941-47), Byron Johnson (1947-52), and especially W.A.C. Bennett and the Social Credit Party (1952-72) expanded resources devoted to such projects to unprecedented levels. A Ministry of Highways was created in 1955 and quickly became one of the most important government portfolios. Commenting on the dominant ethic of the time, political historian Martin Robin characterizes Social Credit’s highways minister, Philip Gaglardi, as “the high priest of a secular religion long practised in a province fragmented into isolated regional and cultural entities ... [whose inhabitants] worshipped the highways, by-ways, and thru-ways, things of brick, mortar and asphalt, which brought them into closer communion.”

Aside from highways, governments took on a great many other projects, including expanding the provincial railway, the Pacific Great Eastern, and building new bridges. Devotees of what Robin calls “the ideology of raw growth,” the Social Credit party felt no compunction about using the state to shape the economic life of the province. As the provincial historian Jean Barman notes, “a strong verbal commitment to free enterprise cheerfully coexisted with a willingness to use the power of the state to set capitalism’s direction.” In 1958 the Social Credit government took over Black Ball, the private company that ran the province’s ferries, and created the BC Ferry Corporation. In an even more dramatic move, Bennett provincialized BC Electric in 1961 and then joined it with BC Power to create the BC Hydro and Power Authority in 1962 to develop hydroelectric energy on the Peace River. Such state initiatives went hand-in-hand with the continuing private development of forestry, mining, fishing, and other provincial resources. These years saw great expansion in these industries but also consolidation of corporate ownership and increased use of technology to manipulate
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The natural world in order to feed what Bennett and others liked to call “the good life.”

Vancouver’s history is replete with the same moments of sudden disjuncture between what used to be and what is. Although the city was not favoured by the provincial government for most of these years, it remained the centre of provincial economic and cultural life. The population of Greater Vancouver almost tripled between 1941 and 1971, going from 374,000 in the early 1940s to more than 1 million inhabitants in the early 1970s. And although this growth occurred in all areas, suburban growth far outpaced that of the city centre. Whereas the City of Vancouver had made up almost 80 percent of the total Greater Vancouver population in 1941, this number shrank to just under 40 percent thirty years later. North and West Vancouver on the north shore of Burrard Inlet became, along with Burnaby, Surrey, Richmond, New Westminster, Coquitlam, and Port Moody, large suburban centres of social and economic activity that changed the nature of urban life and drastically reduced the region’s amount of undeveloped land. Early baby boomers who grew up in Vancouver might still remember milk delivery by horse-drawn cart, iceboxes, and furnaces fed with sawdust, but these rustic aspects of Vancouver’s past quickly disappeared as the city became a much more regulated, automobile-centred, and densely populated place to live. Growing up in Vancouver in these years meant viscerally experiencing the capacity of governments, corporations, and individuals to radically alter the environment with the hope of creating a modern city.24

Indeed, this may be what helped to make Vancouver such a leading light in modernist architecture in the postwar years. The University of British Columbia established a School of Architecture in 1946 and named Fred Lasserre, modernist fan of Le Corbusier, as its first director. The Modernist architecture of Lasserre and others (like the young Arthur Erikson, who designed Simon Fraser University) prided itself on its totalizing vision, which did away with previous traditions and histories for the sake of the architect’s own authority. Although it did try to accommodate itself to the local region and landscape, such natural elements merely acted as one more ingredient through which the architect could design his total vision. Lasserre claimed that, in British Columbia, “we can build the best school of architecture in the country [because] we have no old wood to clear away.”25

All of this gives us a thick description of modern life in postwar Canada, British Columbia, and Vancouver, but the theoretical underpinnings of modern existence still need further explanation. In one sense, of
course, modernity refers to the historical process of tumultuous and ongoing transformation that resulted from the revolutions in science, governance, and economy in seventeenth-century Europe and that has since spread to encompass the globe.\textsuperscript{26} It encapsulates all those features of the historical record – the development of nation states, industrialization, the spread of worldwide capitalism, massive urbanization – that are usually studied individually but that are in fact part of a larger process that we can refer to as modernity. To truly understand modernity, however, we need much more than this. Marshall Berman has given us one of the most evocative (and often quoted) descriptions of modernity. “To be modern,” Berman argues, “is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are ... It pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish.”\textsuperscript{27} Ultimately, modernity is an ambiguous and dichotomous process. The contradictory ideas that surrounded modern manhood in the postwar years were, in this sense, to be expected, as they merely reflected the more general ambiguities of the modern.

But where do these contradictions come from? There are two central dynamics at work. The first is what John Jervis calls the “modernist project.” What binds the modernist project together is a shared belief among modernizers in the inherent value of progress and in the general means of achieving it. The modernist project was both a desire for development as well as a faith that its means – “the rational and purposive control of the environment”\textsuperscript{28} – were beneficent and aesthetically valuable in themselves. The modernist project reified regularity and discipline; it cherished instrumental reason for its ability to make progress possible. James Scott defines high modernism as “a strong, one might even say muscle-bound, version of the self-confidence about scientific and technical progress, the expansion of production, the growing satisfaction of human needs, the mastery of nature (including human nature), and, above all, the rational design of social order commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural laws.”\textsuperscript{29} The modernist project included figures on both the left and the right politically. In the twentieth century, capitalist and communist came together in this one respect to walk in parallel (if tensely arranged) lines toward a vision of progress and the ultimate possibility that nature, society, and the self could be tamed by the application of instrumental reason and sound expertise.\textsuperscript{30}
In this book, most of the modernist dreams of control that I examine have to do with situations of risk. Risk itself is a modern concept. It is not to be confused with the somewhat similar concept of danger. Dangers are troubles that have always existed, such as the danger of combat or accident. The emergence of risk as a significant social category is something else altogether. To call something a risk means that one is trying to control it, that one assesses it, calculates the probabilities of harm, establishes mechanisms and routines to minimize difficulty, and thoroughly examines anything that goes wrong in order to learn from mistakes and improve safety in the future. To take one example that will be pertinent later in the book, while bridge builders in early times no doubt faced many dangers, they did not create the large bureaucracies of workplace safety and compensation that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To do this was to reimagine the dangers faced in the workplace as risks whose social and economic effects could and should be planned for. In this case and others, the modern focus on risk led to the establishment of whole systems and professions of expertise to assess and manage risk. Such risk management expertise – whether in managing the economy, workplace accidents, or public safety – was integral to the modernist belief in the possibility of control and progress.

Because the dictates of modernist planning and risk management required constant change and modification, their ironic effect was to create a great sense of uncertainty. The one-dimensionality of the modernist project, with its excessive promise of control, radicalizes the potential for its opposite. The incongruous effect of an increased emphasis on managing risks was that the mechanisms of progress often created risks in their own right. The postwar years saw the rise of many such modern risks both from the spread of car accidents in the wake of rising car ownership and from the threat of nuclear holocaust that followed from nuclear technology. Although the main goal of the modernist project is to create ever greater trust in the possibilities of progress, such trust can and did become undermined, for it became apparent that although progress eliminated some risks, it also created entirely new ones.

The same process worked at the social and psychological level, where high modernism’s faith in systems of rationalistic knowledge and organization creates the kinds of restrictions that need to be escaped. The responses to this continual process of transformation have taken a variety of forms, from antimodernist nostalgia to a hyper-celebration of the immediacy of the present. Collectively, these responses make up the second main dynamic of modernity, what John Jervis calls the modern
“experience.” Modernist experience was, in a sense, a continual revolt against the one-dimensional dictates of the modernist project. As Jackson Lears has put it, by creating such a limiting “culture of control,” modernity created, in its very wake, the “allure of accident.” The modern period is replete with such moments when modernist values have turned back on themselves, from the celebration of the noble savage in the eighteenth century to the heroism of the gambler in the mid-twentieth. Such figures came to represent those features of life – chance, wildness, nature – most obscured by the modernist project in any one period. They were its ghosts. There was always a sense in which the very best features of the modern, when taken to the extreme, came back as a form of haunting. Modernity’s ghosts did not, as good ghosts should, wait until after death to begin their haunting but were already a spectral presence in the here and now, a mocking shadow of the modern promise of eternal possibility.

During the postwar years, modernity’s ghosts popped up in many places. On the national level, a number of intellectuals made the most serious and consistent criticism of modernity’s ill effects. A variety of figures, including Harold Innis, Arthur Lower, and George Grant, publicly voiced their fears about the increasing role of science and technology in educational institutions and public life more generally. They worried about the loss of community values, traditional forms of social organization, the value of deference, and, in the face of growing Americanization, the loss of Canada’s connection to Britain. The Massey Commission into the arts and cultural life of Canada (1949-51) reflected these fears, and the creation of such institutions as the Canada Council originated, in part, from fears about encroaching Americanization and its “crass” popular culture. Antimodernism in Canada during the 1950s often doubled as anti-Americanism. Although a certain amount of snobbery undoubtedly fed this criticism, it would be wrong to see postwar antimodernism as solely an elite intellectual concern. Indeed, Len Kuffert argues that Canadian cultural critics openly embraced a more populist common culture as a “corollary of unmasking the conformity and false democracy of the cultural marketplace.” Far from unstinting acceptance, then, many Canadians’ response to high modernism was one of deep ambivalence.

The same kind of ambivalence could be found in British Columbia, particularly in Vancouver. Robert McDonald and Arn Keeling have shown how the popular nature writer Roderick Haig-Brown presented his own criticism of the era’s dominant development ethic. Although Haig-Brown still accepted many features of the modernist project (as do most
antimodernists), he nonetheless “sought to forestall the creation of an ultra-modernist social and natural order in BC in order to protect the non-material, non-capitalist values of nature and community.”38 Many Vancouverites expressed their own anxiety in a variety of ways that, while less publicized, reveal the tensions that underlay the modernist project in this Canadian city. Mothers complained to the city about the speed limit on residential streets, questioning the dominance of the car in an area used for childhood play. Vancouverites who liked to hike in the mountains formed organizations to promote wilderness leisure and to protect some forest areas from the axes of industry. Veterans complained about the excessive bureaucracy of the institutions set up to re-establish them in civilian life. They criticized the way that new forms of expert knowledge and rationalized forms of governance mediated their entitlement and its fulfilment. In all of these situations and more, high modernism’s unanticipated consequences caused Vancouverites to become aware of the double-edged nature of that seemingly positive phenomenon called progress.

This book is an exploration of the fundamentally gendered nature of this mediated existence, for as much as postwar Vancouverites saw modern life as contradictory, they also saw the same sorts of contradictions in modern manhood. Men were associated both with the great modernist postwar projects of risk control, namely, managing the economy and welfare state and regulating social life via expertise, and with the adverse side effects of this regulation: emasculation by such trends as complacency and suburban civilization. This book explores the significance of this mirroring. The great irony of this period was not just that of modernity more generally, but also that the idea of the “modern man” could be so frequently invoked in contradictory ways. This leads us to a second notion in need of explanation: masculinity.

**Gender and the Politics of Masculinity**

Gender, as Joan Scott famously argues, “is the social organization of sexual difference.” It is a historically changing set of concepts and relations that gives meaning to differences between men and women. “This does not mean that gender reflects or implements fixed and natural physical differences between women and men,” Scott claims; “rather gender is the knowledge that establishes meanings for bodily differences.” Contrary to popular wisdom, there are no ahistorical foundations for sexual difference rooted in biological or some other solid foundation that exists prior to being understood culturally. We do not have only bodies (sex) upon which gender (culture) is set. Bodies are
not just coat racks upon which genders can be hung, changing colour and style but always remaining the same shape. Instead, the cultural and the bodily come into existence together in the social process of knowing and determining differences between the sexes. It is not a matter of figuring out which came first – the chicken (gender/culture) or the egg (sex/body). Such a linear conception misses the point. Our knowledge of gender is created *simultaneously* with our ideas of the body. This is why, in part, so many scholars use the term gender, not sex: it offers a better sense of how differences between men and women are, and have been, modifiable. For historians, this is an important insight. We have the task of exploring the different ways that conceptions of gender have come into being and changed historically. The task is to scrutinize our ideas about gender and how they are part of larger processes of social organization, cultural values, and individual psyches. “Sexual difference is not,” Scott argues, “the originary cause from which social organization ultimately can be derived. It is instead a variable social organization that itself must be explained.”

Gender is also about power. Historically, gender is one of the main categories of identity (along with race, class, religion, age, and others) through which and by which societies organize themselves and their knowledge. The apparent solidity of gender – its supposed naturalness – makes it a good concept upon which other differences can be mapped. Saying that the differences between such concepts as public and private, passive and aggressive, and so forth are akin to those between masculinity and femininity is a way of saying that they too are natural and comprehensible. Similarly, these and other differences can then be mapped back onto gender in reverse, reinforcing the notion that historically contingent distinctions between the sexes are natural and normal. Because they are so enmeshed in the broader network of social organization, providing support and being supported, claims about differences between the sexes are never apolitical, never mere description. To refer to two concepts in a way that codes one as masculine and the other as feminine is to set up a hierarchy between the two and to contribute to a political knowledge. When postwar childrearing experts emphasized women’s motherly instincts and men’s greater powers of reasoning, implying that women would be most satisfied in the home and men at the drafting table, they did not simply make benign observations, but also made political statements.

Seeing gender in this way – as a social construction and as a way of signifying relations of power – allows us to historicize the ideas of masculinity current in the postwar years. In many different contexts,
masculinity came to be defined as that which was powerful. In part, this can be seen in the tolerance and even celebration of certain forms of men’s violence, and even more prominently, it can be seen in the matching up of manly and modern risk-management ideals. Our task is to understand why masculinity came to be defined in this way. How did this process of gender construction work? What was excluded or denied in order to make the contradictory ideas that went into the ideology of manly modernism seem coherent and stable? To historicize masculinity is to ask both traditional historical questions – such as “Why did it happen?” “Who benefited?” “What was at stake?” – and questions more attuned to gender history and poststructuralism, including “How was the ideal constructed?” and “What was hidden, denied, or overlooked in the quest for the appearance of cultural permanence?” The postwar ideology of manly modernism was not simply prescription or description; instead, it was a particular conception of manliness created (and recreated) in specific contexts, for political purposes, that depended upon a historically specific logic of creation. Common sense is rarely so common or so sensible in hindsight; it is always partial, situated, and interested. Under the scrutiny of gender history in this book, we will see that postwar ideals of manliness also lose their façade of false universality.

To historicize masculinity is a radical endeavour. Until recently, historians had not seriously considered men’s gendered identities. The omission was not a minor one; it was not as though the profession had simply forgotten about hair colour or shoe size. The omission meant that historians had neglected one of the primary ways that power operates and is symbolized. Some conservative historians have lamented the loss of unity brought on by the proliferation of historical topics in the turn to social and cultural history since the 1970s. Yet the comforting national historical narratives that they lament were part of (and not incidental to) a broader process of making men’s power seem natural by making the historical process of its creation invisible. Women had gender: they were the different sex; they were those who possessed (or were possessed by and thus diminished by) a sex. Men were politicians, union leaders, citizens, and most important, humans. That historical traits of good citizenship conveniently mirrored good manly characteristics and, even more conveniently, matched ideals of normal human behaviour was not (according to this line of thinking) part of gender. It just was. To challenge this whitewashing of the historical narrative, to show the contingency of ahistorical pretensions about men’s nongendered being, and to show that men have had a gender and that this identity has often
been constructed in a way that leads to exploitation and domination are worthwhile and long-overdue tasks.\textsuperscript{42}

Any tale of manhood’s “modernization” presents historians with a dilemma. The two terms do not seem to fit together well. Historians are more accustomed to discussing gender and modernity in reference to women. A number of excellent monographs over the past twenty years have shown how single women in the city, whether the middle-class New Woman or the working-class factory hand, became key symbols of modern fears and aspirations. Such women’s apparent (although often not actual) freedom from parental regulation, their sexual practices, and their presence on street corners and in workplaces drew the ire of critics of modern life. The “woman adrift” came to symbolize the often contradictory nature of changes in the emergent industrial capitalist societies of North America and Europe that sought to ensure a patriarchal separation of spheres, on the one hand, while supporting the value of young women’s cheap wage labour, on the other, all the while opening up the possibility for new and unanticipated liberating cultures in the city. This important figure of the modern past has come to dominate our discussion of gender and modernity.\textsuperscript{43}

The frequency with which women have been invoked as symbols of the modern in contemporary historiography tends to obscure that women were usually seen as problematic moderns. As a number of feminist scholars have pointed out, the very meaning of modernity (the modern “canon” as one puts it) is understood in ways culturally understood to be masculine. Marshall Berman’s account of modern experience highlights male philosophers, engineers, and architects; it is about the massive reordering of nature and society so often associated with masculine endeavour. The world of women that could be seen as modern – new domestic arrangements, the independence of the New Woman – either is not a part of this canon or is a part of it, but only as a challenge to the older order. This sharply contrasts with the very central place given to certain types of men and masculinity. While there is value in rewriting women into the history of modernity, as others have done, it is also worthwhile to point out how and why modernity was defined as masculine.\textsuperscript{44} This is one of the purposes of this book.

In Canadian history, when masculinity has arisen in discussions of modernity, the two terms have frequently been presented as antagonistic. The gendered anxieties of men dominated much antimodernist thought throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While women figure in antimodernist fears because of their activity (their presence on the streets and in workplaces), men have become the subject of
antimodern anxieties more often because of their passivity (because of the way that institutions and organizations dampened competition and action). Those in the postwar years who decried the effect of modern life on manhood had many predecessors. Turn-of-the-century Ontario doctors prescribed wilderness holidays so that men suffering from the disease of overcivilization, or neurasthenia, could get in touch with their rugged, manly sides and (presumably) get better. Canada’s most famous painters, the Group of Seven, owed much of their popularity not only to their skill with the brush, but also to the way that their wilderness paintings spoke to a culture that feared the effect of overcivilization on men. Such gendered antimodernist fears also inspired the popularity of big-game hunting in British Columbia. We can also see them at work in the beliefs of many early-twentieth-century Protestants who advocated a more muscular Christianity, notably one of Canada’s most popular writers, Ralph Connor. South of the border, Teddy Roosevelt drew upon the same ideas to foster his own cult of popularity. All of these writers, thinkers, politicians, hunters, ministers, and others collectively saw a disjuncture between the manly and the modern. They looked to a time in the past when men were men, a time that, according to these renditions, was ending.45

Many recent works on manhood continue in this formulation, presenting men (and the ideals of masculinity that they proffer and try to emulate) as reactive to modernity. Masculinity is a defensive category, the voice of tradition: it is what is being changed and never what is active, new, and modern.46 Several prominent examples should help to demonstrate my point. In *Manhood in America*, Michael Kimmel argues that an ideal he calls “the Self-Made Man” arose in the early nineteenth century. Most of *Manhood in America* recounts how generations of middle-class white American men strove to live up to this ideal, never feeling the power that it promised, and blaming various others (women, blacks, homosexuals) for men’s failure to be this kind of man. The problem of masculinity, in this historical account, is that the ideal can never be met, that power is a promise rarely fulfilled, and that masculinity is therefore continually challenged, threatened, and in crisis. In her recent account of the contemporary “crisis” of American manhood, *Stiffed*, Susan Faludi adopts a similar approach, although with less historical range. Oddly for a feminist, Faludi looks back fondly on the immediate postwar years, arguing that contemporary gender troubles including high rates of sexual violence and the crisis of masculinity result from the rise of an ornamental culture that destroyed socially utilitarian values of masculinity that had been so prominent during the Second World War.
and immediately thereafter. Echoing 1950s social critics of the “Organization Man,” she laments the loss of male stoicism and competitiveness and yearns for a time when being a man really mattered. Manhood had once been full of promise, but recent events had led to what she refers to in her subtitle as “the betrayal of the American man.” A more sophisticated version of the threatened manhood thesis is evident in British feminist Lynne Segal’s *Slow Motion*. Segal shows how the popular culture of 1950s Britain celebrated a defensive masculinity in which men railed against the multiple threats of domesticity, unmanliness, and overbearing mothers. All of these developments, she argues, prefigured more radical divisions to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s. Men were changing but not quickly enough. As with Kimmel and Faludi, Segal presents masculinity as something that happens to men. The recent history of masculinity is one of retreat and backlash, of too much or not enough change. Masculinity, presumably, is a single entity that can be threatened. Like a tough child on the top of a hill, it keeps its place by kicking and punching those who try to get to the top even while the dirt is being dug out from beneath its feet.47

In this book, I want to suggest that we historicize the threatened manhood thesis. Instead of taking the threats at face value, we need to see how the notion of threatened manhood is itself a historical construction. We should not be particularly surprised that there has often been a disjuncture between the ideal and the experience of manhood. Gender is an intrinsically unstable category of personal and social existence. At the psychological level, to fully occupy a coherent and purely masculine identity is to repress many other alternatives; to be masculine is to wholly deny femininity. And if the Freudian century has taught us anything, it should be that the repressed never truly stays repressed, that it can bubble over in all kinds of troublesome and contradictory ways. The same can be said for gender on the social level. Coding certain practices, institutions, and cultural symbols as masculine and others as feminine depends upon denying alternate readings and the reality of complex experiences in which, to take but one example, women can be aggressive and men passive. Differences between ideals and realities are to be expected. To say that masculinity is “in crisis” in any one historical era is to say very little.48

In the postwar years, the idea of a threatened manhood was part of a process of consolidating some men’s social power. Just as modernity was itself doubled, creating anxiety as well as optimism, so too were the ideas of masculinity with which it was associated. Far from being a reflection of a reality in which men and ideas of masculinity were
The Manly Modern

endangered, the discourse on threatened manhood represented one response to a cultural process of re-establishing men’s authority. One of the most significant new outfits of postwar masculinity was the ideal of manly modernism. In a variety of contexts, Canadians put men at the centre of the modernist project. Modern life created new risks and demanded a great deal of trust in the engine of progress. One of the ways that this trust was consolidated was by coding as masculine the expertise needed to ensure successful risk taking and risk management. That this process worked unevenly, sometimes bringing unintended consequences, should be seen not as a sign of male disenfranchisement but as exactly what it was: the unplanned side effects of an imperfect strategy of male authority.

The Essays

This book is a series of essays, each of which explores different facets of the doubled nature of manly modernism. Each chapter shows an instance where modern risk management and risk taking were discussed in connection with manhood. In each case study, modern expertise was brought to bear on some aspect of postwar life that came to be seen as needing risk management – whether this was the reintroduction of veterans into the economy and society after the war or evaluating the dreadful deeds of murderers. Moreover, each case shows a different way that modern expertise was gendered as masculine and, equally, where the effects of this expertise on other men was seen to be troublesome. As in all such projects, the choice of case studies is ultimately not exhaustive. However, the sheer range of situations covered in this book – the incredible variety of situations in which manly modernism reared its head – should go some way toward showing just how extensive, and how ambivalent for some men, were the workings of manly modernism.

Chapter 2 begins in the most logical place to begin any study of postwar masculinity and modernity, with the experience of veterans, who occupied a privileged place in the culture and politics of the postwar years because of their service in war. This special place was inherently gendered, based as it was on men’s willingness to serve. Although women could and did serve in the armed forces, men’s wartime sacrifices were understood to be at the heart of the war. Because of their service in the war, they had earned special entitlements, represented in the federal government’s swath of legislated benefits, collectively called the Veterans Charter. Aside from rewarding manly sacrifice, the other driving force behind the Veterans Charter was an attempt to manage the social, political, and economic risks associated with the return of soldiers. In
other words, the Veterans Charter represented the coming together of both the manly and the modern, the risk taking of war and the risk management of the modern bureaucratic state. This chapter explores how exactly they meshed, which emerges through the records of a small Royal Commission convened when a group of Vancouver veterans of both the Great War and the Second World War complained that they had not been treated properly by government officials. The ideology of manly modernism permeated the language of those on the commission and those appearing before it. The commission upheld the notion that male veterans had a special entitlement and that the state had a key role to play in re-establishing a certain kind of masculinity after the war. The challenge thus became how to best manage and organize the rights of this manly entitlement. This is where most of the complaints arose, pitting veterans against the expertise of psychiatrists and the bureaucratic logic of the Department of Veterans’ Affairs and the Canadian Pension Commission. Masculinity occupied both sides of the modernist project in this interaction between men and the state: it provided the reason for the creation of a huge state apparatus to provide compensation and benefits for wartime service; and at the same time, masculinity seemed to be threatened when this bureaucracy created its own unanticipated problems.

In Chapter 3, we move directly into the heart of postwar mythology: the notions of economic progress and development, myths that were especially important in Vancouver and British Columbia. This chapter looks at how Vancouverites responded to a bridge collapse in 1958. On 17 June of that year, the Second Narrows Bridge collapsed during construction, killing eighteen workers. The bridge was one part of a broader process of economic modernization in British Columbia and Vancouver, meant to facilitate suburban growth on the north shore and to boost shipping trade in Burrard Inlet. The response of many Vancouverites to the bridge’s collapse demonstrated how they associated the risks that made this economic development possible (building and engineering the bridge) with idealized conceptions of masculinity. As in war, contemporaries defined the ability to handle and manage risk as masculine traits, those that also just happened to be essential to the postwar vision of economic growth. Within this broader consensus, however, hierarchies of men and masculinities emerged. While newspapers and politicians praised working-class men’s risk taking, they ultimately valued the rational, expert knowledge of middle-class engineers, using this knowledge (and these types of men) as arbiters of the collapse’s official truth. In this case, the tensions within postwar ideas of
masculinity – between the bodily and the rational, or risk taking and risk managing – worked along class lines.

Clearly, then, many middle-class men benefited from their privileged place as experts within the postwar modernist project, with the tendency of Vancouverites to identify middle-class masculinity with all that was progressive about postwar modernization. Some of these men, however, found the bureaucratic, rational, and suburban world of postwar affluence to be more stifling than inspiring. For these men, the risk taking of bridge workers and veterans served as a kind of romantic fantasy, something that they could try to live out through their leisure activities. Chapter 4 looks at the history of the British Columbia Mountaineering Club and at a group of postwar Vancouverites who took to climbing mountains as a way to find a more meaningful connection to their surroundings. While both men and women belonged to the club, mountaineering was a distinctly gendered activity in which men dominated the riskiest ventures and in which the traits of the ideal mountaineer matched the traits of the ideal man. Yet here, too, the ironies of manly modernism persisted. Mountaineers took up their sport in part because it offered them an escape from the seemingly emasculating effects of the urban and suburban experience of postwar Vancouver. They went to the mountains in order to find a more primal experience. However, their choice of mountaineering as an escape belied their claims to truly leave behind the values of postwar modernity. Mountaineering was a blend of risk taking and risk management that mimicked the modern expertise of engineers, scientists, and bureaucrats. Mountaineers ended up advocating a balance between the twin possibilities of manly modernism: the daring risk taker and the cautious risk manager.

This ambiguous collaboration between expertise and definitions of masculinity also figured prominently in another major way in which postwar Vancouverites turned to modern expertise to manage social risks: the interpretation of the actions of murderers. In the postwar years, a variety of experts (especially psychiatrists and psychologists) increasingly entered into the criminal justice system, acting as a main source of knowledge about men and their violence. Contemporaries picked up the language of these mental health experts and, in the process, contributed to the medicalization of masculinity, which is the focus of Chapter 5. Between 1945 and the late 1960s, Vancouver courts convicted twenty-four people (all men) of capital murder, a crime punishable by hanging. Within these trials, and especially in the discussions leading up to the decision over whether to commute the death sentence, a murderer’s manhood mattered a great deal in how he was treated. As in
earlier periods, Vancouverites judged the severity of murder not just by the details of the crime itself, but also by the gendered identity of the murderer. The subject of this chapter is the relation between evaluations of masculinity and medical expertise. Although convicted men often turned to experts to help explain their actions, the experts could end up alienating the men from their actions and potentially also from their identity. The men could not define themselves on their own; instead, both they and their actions required expert interpretation. As in the case of veterans and that of the bridge collapse, these murder cases show the growing collaboration with (and tension between) ideas of masculinity and the institutions and practices of (often middle-class) modern expertise.

In Chapter 6, we deal with the link between manhood and what is perhaps the most everyday form of risk in the postwar years: driving a car. The postwar years saw a dramatic rise in car ownership in Vancouver, and this “Golden Age” of the automobile also brought an increase in the number of traffic accidents. The safety expertise that grew up alongside the postwar car culture responded to this increased risk in a characteristically modern way. Eschewing any criticism of the technology itself, they called upon drivers to become rational, calculating experts, assessing all dangers before they arose. The best way to deal with the risks created by the automobile age, they argued, was to balance the desire for speed and power against the necessity of careful risk management. In this appeal to a uniquely modernist expertise, the ideal driver looked much like the ideal mountaineer and bridge worker: all invoked a discourse of risk management that mirrored the ideology of manly modernism. From the perspective of traffic safety discourse, the process of becoming a safe driver closely resembled the process of becoming a modern man. In the mid-1960s, however, a growing number of critics emerged to challenge the safety consensus and the idealized manly driver that it advocated. Building on the impetus provided by American critics of car culture, Jane Jacobs and Ralph Nader, a group of Vancouverites argued against and defeated plans to build a freeway through, and to redevelop part of, the eastern end of the city’s downtown. These critics found fault with many of the same features of the modernist project that earlier Vancouver men found to be troublesome: the authoritarian nature of modern expertise and the negative unanticipated consequences of unfettered rational and instrumental reason. In taking this stand, they represented a broader challenge to the modernist project and to its accompanying celebration of manly modern ideals. Ironically, these 1960s radicals also, for different purposes and to different effect, picked
up on a criticism of modernity that had been a central feature of discussions of masculinity throughout the postwar years.

Each of the essays examines a moment when the contradictions of modernity were laid bare; they highlight the disjuncture between promises of control and the possibilities of chaos, between the terror and the beauty of rationalization and organization. Collectively, the essays show the development of an ideology of manly modernism at just these moments of modernist crisis. In these instances, the modernist project showed itself to be ultimately about controlling and manipulating bodies and environments through the rationalistic practices of expertise and risk management. In these contexts, a range of Vancouverites defined modernist expertise and masculinity in nearly identical terms, providing a cultural foundation that backed up the reality that most such experts were in fact men. However, like the modernist project more generally, this process was inconsistent, disciplining some men and some traits of masculinity even as it upheld the manly modern ideal. So while the case studies show manly modernism at work, they also show it in decay: we see its inadequacies, its fault lines, and the possible reasons why some men would increasingly come to look for other ways to define manhood. The celebration of the rational risk manager coexisted uneasily with other traits previously associated with masculinity; and while contemporaries coded modern expertise as masculine in a general sense, such expertise also had the effect of disciplining men themselves, often based upon lines of race, sexuality, and class. This tension continued throughout the postwar years, providing a persistent sense of doubt about the benefits of modernity and a previously unexplored (and certainly unintended) legacy for the more sustained criticism of the modernist project that emerged in the later 1960s.

This book is an itinerary of my trip through past understandings of masculinity and, like any such document, reflects my own particular sense of the places that I knew to visit. I have been most interested in stretching the boundaries of what we think of as masculine and in the ways that we might see masculinity as being constructed. A few absences are worth regretfully mentioning. My desire to show how masculinity and men’s power has operated in all-male encounters has meant that I focus less on relations between the sexes than a fuller account of postwar gender relations warrants. And in an effort to see the main attractions of a dominant form of masculinity, I sometimes do not spend time searching out the very important places where subordinate and alternate masculinities were formed. This is also not a history of Vancouver
Introduction

modernity and masculinity but a history of manly modernism as it took shape in Vancouver; it is not a work of local history, with that genre’s emphasis upon specifically regional particularities. I hope, however, that these absences will be taken as the logical outcome of a still useful endeavour. From the very beginning, the project always seemed too large and in need of restraint. To discuss either masculinity or modernity is a great deal of work. To take on both together has meant more years of struggle than I care to remember, only toward the end of which have I truly been able to see and explain the connections that my instincts had told me were there from the beginning.

When he painted the giant mural for the Marine Workers’ and Boiler Makers’ Industrial Union Hall, Fraser Wilson knew all about the contradictions of manly modernism. He came to paint the mural only after he had been blacklisted from his regular work. Wilson had been a prominent political cartoonist on the Canadian left, most notably for the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation. But after he took a lead role in a 1947 newspaper strike, the main Vancouver dailies blacklisted him, forcing him to find other work. The mural was one of the jobs he found that year. In the Cold War climate, the beneficence of capitalist modernity was likely lost on Wilson. Yet it is striking that he still took up and celebrated the modernist spirit of control, rationality, and efficiency in the mural. In his version, of course, it is the workers who are in control. Manly modernism was clearly not to be abandoned. It was a source of inequality, frustration, and difficulty yet at the same time also clearly a symbol of potential authority and status. Despite the inequalities and contradictions, symbols of manly modernism moved across social boundaries, touching a wide variety of men in postwar Vancouver.

In an age when so many discussions of gender difference rely on biological, evolutionary, and “caveman” explanations, the category of the modern man may seem a quixotic digression. Yet, in the uneven balance that postwar Canadians tried to achieve in their definitions of what made one a man, we may find the very unexpected roots of our current gender fixations. The postwar struggle between notions of man as ideal modern and man as modern victim was not just an interesting sidebar to the era’s cultural history. Instead, it was part of a broader ideology of manly modernism that pervaded the postwar years, providing a source of gendered power and authority in a variety of contexts from mountaineering expeditions to workplaces. Manly modernism identified as masculine the very traits that were considered normal and appropriate to being modern even as it invented a history of primitive manhood to
bolster this association and to retreat into when necessary. That such an ideology mattered, that it was not simply an ideal against which men struggled, that it helped to provide men like Fraser Wilson with greater authority in concrete situations, and that it had important repercussions for the era that followed are what, in the following chapters, I shall endeavour to prove.