Sally Hacker Prize 2018

Marie Hicks (National Humanities Center)
For *Programmed Inequality: How Britain Discarded Women Technologists and Lost Its Edge in Computing* (MIT Press, 2017).

The Sally Hacker Prize for 2018 is awarded to *Programmed Inequality: How Britain Discarded Women Technologists and Lost Its Edge in Computing,* by Marie Hicks. A historical study of gender, technological change, and emerging national conceptions of civil and economic order, *Programmed Inequality* disputes the notion that the origins and impacts of computing can be understood in isolation from the broadest patterns of cultural change. In the strongest tradition of SHOT scholarship, the book offers readers the opportunity to consider that even the most "modern" technologies can carry forward long-established social habits. Rich in anecdote as well as accessibly framed, the book will reward both popular and scholarly audiences, persuading readers that histories of life and labor in the "information age" remain incomplete without deep historical knowledge of the technologies involved and the uses to which they were put.

Recounting British efforts to contend with operations in a global war and then with post-war economic reconversion, *Programmed Inequality* carries readers through the ambitious efforts of the UK's governmental and industrial actors to make the most of the new promises of computing. These included enhancing military and industrial efficiency through automation, streamlining bureaucracies in the nascent welfare state, and smoothing the operations of its burgeoning security and energy sectors. That each of these efforts reflected dramatically increasing data dependence is clear; but the role of information technologies in *sustaining* features of Britain's traditional social and civic landscape is less so, and this sort of continuity is Hicks' real historical focus. The people doing the work of computing become her most important actors. These people, Hicks explains, were mostly women who by the thousands programmed and operated the new technologies for military and peacetime uses, handling both mechanical and data processing tasks. She renders few of these women as individuals because they "cannot speak through the archives as individuals," Hicks writes; they appear mostly in the surviving evidence "only as a group," as seen by male employers, managers, and policy makers. Such men viewed women as generations of men had done previously: as people employable at lower wages with limited potential and career mobility. Men, meanwhile, constituted a pool of more costly but presumably trainable people who deserved promotion to skilled managers, executives or technical experts. It is the simultaneous development of new information-centered infrastructures and these enduring demarcations of gender identity that Hicks so ably illuminates. Ultimately, difference-making becomes her primary subject.

Programmed Inequality describes in detail the barriers to women's earning power and promotion in computer-centered jobs both in business and government. We experience the tensions between the democratic ideologies of post-war British planning (which produced, for example the National Health Service) and the UK's patently inequitable social structures; between the voices of women demanding fair opportunities in the 1970s and the commitments of British policy makers to a feminized and disempowered technical work force. At each juncture, Hicks helps us see that prevailing ideas about women's and men's different innate capacities found their way into job descriptions, wage structures and broad patterns of opportunity and recognition. Stubborn, generations-old forms of gender discrimination shaped

British perceptions of labor shortages and explain the frequently ineffectual solutions, in spite of the employment of cutting-edge machines, the UK devised for such problems.

That such rear-guard thinking is utterly compatible with the modernizing impulse is just one of many transferrable lessons that readers will take away from Hicks' lucid study. *Programmed Inequality* offers many ideas vital for looking critically at technologies other than computing. For example, we learn that labor activism often arises from the experiences of workers facing new technological conditions and how the rhetoric around new technology, linking national security and prosperity in the case of the UK, can also incorporate the systematic marginalization, the "rendering invisible," of many citizens. Most fundamentally, Hicks makes clear that Britain's economic and technological decline in the twentieth-century—its fading influence as a nation-- derived in no small part from social traditions, from prevailing understandings of the cultural category of gender.

In guiding a general readership to this deep and complex way of looking at machines and technological modernization, Hicks has achieved a truly commendable feat, one for which SHOT is pleased to award her the Hacker Prize.