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Book Review

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Book Reviews

FEMINIST HISTORY IN CANADA: NEW ESSAYS ON WOMEN, GENDER, WORK, AND NATION

Catherine Carstairs and Nancy Janovicek (Eds.). UBC Press, Vancouver, 2013, 302 pages.

Feminist History in Canada is a collection of essays on gender, work, and women that is very relevant to a number of disciplines in the humanities such as adult education, history, and women's studies. This collection of essays came out of a conference in 2010 sponsored by the Canadian Committee on Women's History/Comité canadien de l'histoire des femmes (CCHW-CCHF) entitled "Edging Forward, Acting Up: Gender and Women's History at the Cutting Edge of Scholarship and Social Action." The editors of this book, Catherine Carstairs and Nancy Janovicek, bring together scholars from across Canada to focus on how feminism, history, and activism are being taken up in new ways in the last decade, which builds on previous research in this area.

One of the strengths of this collection of essays is that it endeavours to create new knowledge by consciously exploring women's lives at both the individual and structural levels through a variety of sources. Feminist historians have a huge, ubiquitous challenge in that research data are not easily acquired. As many of the authors here point out, official historical archives are often silent on the contributions and experiences of women. Thus, researchers have had to seek out other sources to excavate knowledge. In this book, they have drawn upon traditional sources such as local and national archives, Statistics Canada, government policies, and larger transnational political histories to contextualize their findings. But these researchers have also used oral history interviews, diaries, internally circulated business magazines, committee memos, and private letter correspondences. The expanse of topics in these essays is vast, but what unites them is the sustained interest in historical women's lives as interpreted from a feminist viewpoint. Editors Carstairs and Janovicek identify four main themes: biography, women's work, activism, and transnational networks.

Using a biographical, post-colonial theoretical framework, Adele Perry explores the biography of the Creole/Métis British Columbia governor James Douglas and, largely through his writings, tries to piece together a narrative about his indigenous wife, Amelia Connolly. Heidi MacDonald and Gail Campbell use diaries in their essays to explore gender

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relations. MacDonald contends that women during the Great Depression may have chosen to remain single or delayed marriage, rather than assuming, as other historians have, that the reason would be a potential husband's inability to be the breadwinner or family needing financial support from these young women. Campbell interprets the diaries of men and women in rural New Brunswick in the 19th century to explore the dynamics of family and community. Using a critical theory lens to examine the racialized and gendered societal power dynamics that her case study participant experienced after the Second World War, Kristina Llewellyn self-reflectively considers the experiences of Hazel Chow, a home economics teacher in British Columbia.

Focusing on the difficult balance between women's paid and unpaid labour, a number of the essays in this collection go in depth on the uneasy history of gendered labour relations. Catherine Gidney focuses on the deans of women nurses, doctors, dieticians, and physical training instructors at Victoria College, University of Toronto, from 1900 to 1940. These professional women, acting as models of independent professional women, were also dependent on their careers for financial stability. These professional women encouraged women students to take up their own careers while simultaneously cautioning them that to do so meant giving up their "higher calling to motherhood." H el ene Charron also unearths the history of professional women in academia at Laval University from 1943 to 1972, which has until now remained largely undocumented and understudied. Fast-forwarding to the 1970s and 1980s, Ruby Heap considers how women engineers in these decades formed national professional alliances to openly advocate for the eradication of wage discrimination and how women could balance home/work life. In this sense, women engineers had a feminist mandate, yet many women engineers opposed feminist critiques of technology at the time, which suggested that there were essential differences between the way male and female engineers did their jobs. The tension of a broad spectrum of feminist analyses is also very evident in Donica Belisle's essay, which explores the dichotomy of women as working subjects/sexualized objects in the discourse of Canadian department store magazines from 1920 to 1950. Catherine Charron investigates the complex lives and experiences of working-class Quebec women in domestic services from 1960 to 2009 through in-depth interviews.

Professional careers are sometimes the jumping-off point for political activism as is the case discussed in Karen Balcom's essay on the friendships between several key women players in fostering a new vision for child welfare policies in Canada and the United States and on the international front. Anthony Hampton argues that women's grassroots political activism and informal, ad-hoc networks are powerful as seen in the case discussed here, whereby activists' responses to the Meech Lake Accord had tremendous impact on national constitutional laws. On a personal note, it was sentimental for me to read Lorna McLean's essay on Julia Grace Wales's life as a peace activist and scholar who, among her many accomplishments, including an internationally highly regarded manifesto on how to sustain peace, was involved in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, an organization that I volunteered with for a number of years. Activists have also played a role in ensuring that school curricula reflect a gendered Canadian history. Rose Fine-Meyer explores the role of the Ontario Women's History network in successfully bringing together a variety of organizations representing scholars, teachers, and historical communities to lobby for greater inclusion of women's history (largely ignored in history textbooks being used in Ontario schools).

Several of these essays offer a transnational analysis, which provides a broader framework for understanding how historical events have played out and potential motivations of key players in policy decision making. To give just one example, Adele Perry traces several generations of family, which in turn illuminates the hybridity of identities and the socially constructed aspects of imperial laws based on racial hierarchy.

In reading these essays, I am struck anew with the bravery of so many women in their hard-won battles for equity and equality despite numerous systemic barriers. Written in clear, accessible prose, these essays recover knowledge not discussed elsewhere or reinterpret materials in ways that shed new insight into feminist perspectives, which will be of great interest to a broad audience.

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