

## Margaret Conrad in Conversation with Donna Smyth, Founding Editor of *Atlantis*

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### Margaret Conrad

What do you remember about the founding of *Atlantis*?

### Donna Smyth

When I arrived at Acadia University in the fall of 1973, female faculty had managed to establish an interdisciplinary women's studies course, which brought feminists on the faculty together in a very special way. The problem we all faced in teaching the course was a lack of published sources for our students, which gave our detractors reason to claim women's studies courses had no place in the academy. There was some talk of publishing our lectures but that did not get off the ground. One day in the fall of 1974 when I was driving to work - and I swear this is true - as I approached Avonport Hill, an inner voice said to me: "You should found a women's studies journal called *Atlantis*." Well, maybe the name did not come to me just at that moment but it did soon thereafter.

### Conrad

Why did you want to call it *Atlantis*?

### Smyth

As we explained in the first issue, which appeared in the Fall of 1975, I saw *Atlantis* as a symbol of the lost kingdom of women's knowledge, which we were striving to rediscover. This analogy made perfect sense to me but we did get a few silly letters suggesting that *Atlantis* symbolized lost causes just like the women's movement.

### Conrad

What was your vision of what *Atlantis* should be?

### Smyth

I am not sure what my initial vision was and, once I mentioned the idea to others in the women's studies course, the idea just took off. We wanted to

publish all the exciting new ideas that were being generated by the women's movement in Canada. Inevitably this meant that the journal would be an interdisciplinary one, since every field of knowledge was being challenged by feminist perspectives. Moreover, we wanted to include creative work - fiction, poetry, art - because it played such an important role in the women's movement and because women had long excelled in these areas. We also wanted to reach a wider audience than just an academic one, which accounts for the extraordinary range of material we published in the early issues. Funding regulations eventually curbed the scope of our output.

### Conrad

Can you recall how we funded the first issue?

### Smyth

When we began planning the journal in the fall of 1974 there was a lot of publicity about the United Nations declaration of 1975 as International Women's Year. The Department of the Secretary of State had established an International Women's Year Fund and we applied for a grant. When we were turned down we were outraged. In retrospect it was clear that Ottawa-based funding bodies tended not to take applications that came out of the Maritimes very seriously. We protested their decision quite loudly and effectively, ultimately getting a grant that helped us through our first year.

### Conrad

If I remember correctly, we got people from all across Canada to protest. The granting committee was no doubt surprised that we had such contacts. From the beginning our Advisory Board was drawn from across the country and our early editorial and production collectives included Maureen Baker, Lethem Sutcliffe Roden, and Lois Valley-Fischer who grew up in Ontario, Lorette Toews from the

western Canada, Gillian Thomas and Hilary Thompson from Great Britain, Paula Chegwiddden Felt, Wendy Katz, and Deborah Kaetz from the United States (part of that wonderful wave of Americans who came to Canada during the Vietnam War period) as well as Carrie Fredericks and myself who were Maritime-born.

### Smyth

We should not forget that in the early years we also received funds from private donors. The support for our efforts was just amazing. Eventually Canada Council/SSHRC funding kicked in, but there never was enough money and nearly everyone worked on *Atlantis* for the love of it, not for pay. Acadia University supported the venture in kind through the Acadia Institute but would not provide on-going funding for the journal or release time for the editors. By 1980 we were beginning to feel quite bitter about that, especially since other academic initiatives, now long gone, were given more support than we received. This situation made it easy for us to take up Mount Saint Vincent's offer to manage the journal. It turned out to be a good idea. Susan Clark, who was one of the movers and shakers at the Mount, came on board as co-editor in 1977 and helped to make the transition a smooth one. The Editors of *Atlantis* now report directly to the Mount's President, Dr. Sheila Brown.<sup>1</sup> It would be hard to imagine that ever happening at Acadia or most other universities for that matter.

### Conrad

Because of our lack of financial resources, one of the most memorable aspects of the early years for me was the production process. The English Department secretary Joy Cavazzi typed the text on an IBM Selectrix and the editors pasted it down on pages for camera ready copy that was printed by the press of the local newspaper. At the end of a Saturday -- it was always a Saturday -- spent sticking down typed copy and Letraset titles, we were all pretty light-headed from the glue. How much easier our lives would have been had the personal computer and PageMaker come along a little sooner.

### Smyth

But with computers we would not have had the

unique page and logo design that was developed especially for us by Denise Saulnier.

### Conrad

The visual content of *Atlantis* was unusual for an academic journal. Much of the credit for that goes to Susanne MacKay who produced the first two covers and many fine illustrations over the years, while Gillian Thomas somehow managed to convince Ron Merrick to help us with photographic reproduction. What a lot of work it was just getting issues out, on top of doing all the other things required of what quickly became a refereed journal.

### Smyth

I guess that is why I suggested that you and Susan Clark become co-editors in 1977!

### Conrad

Why did we willingly take on so much work?

### Smyth

I think it was the fact that we just kept getting so many fine submissions. The women's movement unleashed a well of creativity that still has not been fully tapped. In 1976 the Mount hosted the first interdisciplinary conference of research on women and things just exploded after that. Even with the appearance of other women's studies journals in Canada, we still always had more than enough material for two issues a year, and if we published conference proceedings we produced a third issue.

### Conrad

It is encouraging to know that one of the 'problems' still faced by the editors of *Atlantis* is the high volume of submissions. Barring unforeseen difficulties, we should be able to have another conversation about *Atlantis* twenty-five years from now!

### ENDNOTE

1. The Editors communicate with the Publisher, Mount Saint Vincent University, via Dr. Sheila Brown, who represents the University in her role as President and member of the Editorial Panel, but they are not responsible to her for the editorial content.