

Introduction

Feminism and Canadian History

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In the fall of 1975, the first issue of *Atlantis* was launched. It was the brainchild of Donna Smyth, a professor of English at Acadia University, and appeared with the help of a dedicated band of feminist scholars and artists who were eager to circulate the exciting new ideas that were being discussed in their interdisciplinary women's studies course, established - after much shaking of heads by Acadia's administrators - two years earlier. To mark this milestone, we explore the impact of feminism on the writing of Canadian history. Why history? In the 1970s women's history emerged as a powerful current within the women's movement and played a prominent role in the women's studies courses gaining a tentative foothold in the academy. As we look back over a quarter century of feminist scholarly publishing, it seems timely to reflect on the relationship between feminism and historical scholarship in Canada, past and present.

When asked to comment on the impact of feminism on the historical profession for the February 2000 (XVII, 5) issue of *The Women's Review of Books*, our American sisters were, on balance, highly positive. Kathryn Kish Sklar suggested that feminism's influence can be found in the vital field of women's history that is now firmly rooted in the university curriculum. Tracing the origins of the most recent developments in women's history to the college campuses of the late 1960s where feminism found fertile soil, Sklar also linked interest in women's history to the women's movement and to her own generation of academics who were young outsiders eager to take on the project of changing history. Jacqueline Jones agreed that the field of women's history was now more integrated into American history and that female historians themselves are well represented in conference programs and on executives of major

historical associations. At the same time, she cautioned against letting down our guard, noting that high school texts still fail to reflect current historical scholarship, students steer away from, or misunderstand, the term "feminist," and historians mainly talk to each other in academic journals.

Similar cautions might be more strongly voiced in Canada where neither affirmative action nor women's studies are as fully supported in the academy as they are in the United States. Nevertheless, the field of Canadian women's history had made significant advances. Even in the first issue of *Atlantis* it was apparent that a new generation of feminist historians was hard at work: Veronica Strong-Boag and Jennifer Stoddart contributed an article on domestic labour and Deborah Gorham explored the suffrage movement, while books such as *Women at Work: Ontario, 1850-1930* and *The Indomitable Lady Doctors* were reviewed. Many history departments now have a course or two in women's history and the appearance of *L'histoire des Femmes au Québec au Quatre Siècles* (Montréal: Quinz, 1982) and *Canadian Women: A History* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), together with an abundance of articles and monographs, means that there is no shortage of pedagogical material for a course on Canadian women's history. Nor, with the publication of *Creating Historical Memory: English-Canadian Women and the Work of History* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), are we as ignorant as we once were of the work of female historians who went before us.

So where do women's history and female historians stand at the beginning of a new century? A recent survey, commissioned by the Canadian Historical Association (CHA) in 1998 and carried out by Ruby Heap of the University of Ottawa, asked both male and female professors to rate their

perceptions of the field of women's history. While slightly more women than men gave it a low rating (28 percent of women, 21 percent of men), approximately two-thirds of both men and women gave women's history a rating of "good" or "very good" and eight percent of women and nine percent of men gave a rating of "excellent." When compared with the same questions asked in the CHA's 1989 survey, it is apparent that both men and women in the later survey had dramatically more positive perceptions of the field. In terms of women's presence within the discipline, women were 25.5 percent of history professors (full-time, tenured, or leading to tenure positions) in 1998. With the inclusion of non-tenured women and men, women represented 26.8 percent of the total in 1998 (Status of Women Supplement, *CAUT Bulletin*, April 2000).

Surveys are limited in what they can tell us. Although the 1998 one provides a snapshot of the profession and some means of comparing the data to that of ten years earlier, it tells us little about the state of the field intellectually. To explore this question we asked a variety of scholars to take on a particular area of women's/gender history and ask themselves: What has changed? How has feminism affected the practice of history? Since Canada's vast geography and regional differences have shaped the way our history is written, we asked several authors to consider the recent scholarship in their region or province. We also arranged with the CHA programme committee at the 1999 Congress of the Social Sciences and Humanities meetings in Sherbrooke, Québec, to host a panel on women's studies and women's history and to include the revised presentations in this volume under the feature banner "Women's Studies in Focus." In addition, we received reflections on issues of class, race, and sexuality that have played a significant role in conceptualizing women's history.

While readers will want to assess the essays themselves, we offer a few brief observations. We are struck by the growth of the field and the diversity of approaches taken to women's history, as well as the increasingly complex relationship between women's and gender history. From the beginning, women's history was enriched by an exciting interdisciplinarity and creative anarchy. There is no need to rehearse the challenges presented by post-structuralism here but

it is clearly only the most recent in a long line of theoretical approaches that intersected with feminist perspectives to advance historical understanding. In Canada, the relationship between gender and region, a subject addressed in several essays but most strongly in Suzanne Morton's "Gender, Place, and Region: Thoughts on the State of Women in Atlantic Canadian History," cannot be ignored. Micheline Dumont's essay on Quebec history most directly addresses the question of whether and to what extent feminism has influenced the writing of history generally. Her findings are not encouraging. Charlene Porsild's essay reminds us of our relative ignorance of the North and corrects some of the common misperceptions of the history of women who have lived there. Cecilia Morgan tackles the large literature on Ontario while Kate McPherson writes of Prairie women's historiography. Adele Perry surveys recent developments in British Columbia, thus completing our cross-country tour.

Other essays explore thematic areas, some of them in older, more established topics, such as Joan Sangster on labour and working-class history, while others pursue less well-worked fields: Afua Cooper on African-Canadian women's history; Jo-Anne Fiske on aboriginal scholarship; and Becki Ross on sexuality and gender. Finally, we have begun the volume with Frances Early's article on women in peace history to honour and highlight the memory of Barbara Roberts, feminist historian, Quaker, peace activist, women's studies professor, union activist, and general consciousness-raiser. Born in 1941, she died in June 1998. This issue is dedicated to her memory.

NB: Readers please note that because of space constraints, articles by Wendy Mitchinson and Jan Noel, the interview with Donna Smyth, one of the founders of *Atlantis*, and book reviews assigned for "Feminism and Canadian History" have been moved to Part Two of the 25th Anniversary Volume, to be released in Spring 2001. We hope you will read on and not miss these important contributions.