

# Coming in from the Cold: Reflections on the History of Women in Northern Canada

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## ABSTRACT

Although there have been a number of recent publications documenting and interpreting women's northern experiences, northern women's lives remain relatively under-studied in Canada. This essay examines the major published works on the history of women in the Canadian North since 1975, discusses some of the new models, and suggests possibilities for new research.

## RÉSUMÉ

Malgré qu'il y ait eu un nombre de publications récentes qui documentent et interprètent les expériences des femmes du Nord, leur vie reste relativement peu étudiée au Canada. Cette dissertation étudie les ouvrages importants publiés sur les femmes du Nord canadien depuis 1975, discute de quelques nouveaux modèles, et suggère de nouvelles occasions pour de nouvelles recherches.

As the other essays in this issue ably demonstrate, the past two and one half decades have seen a blossoming of historical writing on Canadian women. The same could be said for the history of northern Canada, which has undergone its own renaissance in the same period. And while the field remains small, there have been a number of important works on northern Canadian women that mark the way for scholars in the twenty-first century. This essay examines the major published works on the history of women in the Canadian North over the last twenty-five years, and concludes that while progress has been slow, great inroads have been made both in documenting women's lives in the North as well as in creating new models for studying the context of those lives.

In Canada, northern and arctic history remained the exclusive domain of popular historians until the late 1970s. The arctic, its trials and perils, the boom and bust of mineral and oil rushes, were the stuff of legend, and thus, left to legend makers and embellishers. The North was a place where brave men and sometimes dogs - but never women - challenged the elements while seeking knowledge, wealth, and empire. Sir John Franklin, Robert E. Peary, Vilhjalmar Stefansson, and other men were legendary figures who faced great adversity with courage and (usually) great success. Even the fictional male characters created by Robert Service

- Dan McGrew, Sam McGee, and their friends - were larger than life. When women appeared in any of these northern epics they almost surely fit one of three stereotypes: nameless, degraded Aboriginal women; faithful, saintly wives of missionaries and mounted police officers; and tawdry, but good-hearted practitioners of the world's oldest profession.

Slowly, from the late 1960s through to the mid 1980s, historians reexamined these images as they sought to create a new story that contextualised northern Canadian history. David Morrison, Morris Zaslow, Thomas Stone, Ken Coates, and Bill Morrison began the long and difficult work of sifting through boxes of explorers' journals, government reports, court dockets, jail records, and missionary journals to create a more accurate and detailed view of northern life in the contact and early settlement period.<sup>1</sup> As historians began a re-examination of northern Canada's place in the national picture, more scholars began to see the region as unexplored territory for scholarly enquiry. Yet this first generation of northern scholars paid little attention to women. The dearth of scholarly attention to northern Canadian women is not due to a paucity of sources. Raw material abounds in scores of published and unpublished memoirs and journals of northern women missionaries, professionals, and travelers. The past decade has

witnessed the publication or reissue of a number of northern women's writings. Recently Martha Louise Black's *My Ninety Years*, an autobiography of the Yukon's most gracious first lady, and Laura Berton's *I Married the Klondike*, the memoir of a young, single teacher who journeyed north, have been re-released. Agnes Deans Cameron's memoir, reissued in 1986 as *The New North*, also now offers us a middle class woman's impressions of travels through the Canadian arctic and subarctic in the early part of the twentieth century. These standard primary sources on northern women are supplemented by a wealth of newly available documents by women, including Anna DeGraf's memoir of a working class mother who went north in search of her grown son and stayed on to make the Yukon her home, Elizabeth Robins' diary of her Klondike days as a journalist, and Hannah Breece's memoir of teaching school in rural Alaska. The popularity of these works encouraged other welcome additions to the published primary material including *The Ladies, the Gwich'in, and the Rat*, the edited account of Clara Vyvyan and Gwendolyn Dorrien Smith who traveled the Athabasca, Mackenzie, Rat, and Yukon rivers in 1926; and *This Distant and Unsurveyed Country: A Woman's Winter at Baffin Island, 1857-58*, the annotated shipboard journal of Margaret Penny.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the availability of primary source material, historians have been slow to ask questions about women's northern experiences. The general pattern of investigation, when it did emerge, began in the Yukon and slowly moved eastward to the Northwest Territories and the provincial norths. One of the earliest pieces of historical investigations of women in the Yukon was Laurie Alberts' essay "Petticoats and Pickaxes," which appeared in 1977. Alberts was the first historian to articulate what most women in the Yukon had always known: during the Klondike gold rush, the experience of women was much more diverse than the popular stereotype of dance hall girls and prostitutes had led us to believe. It was fully another decade, however, before a book length study appeared documenting the range of women's experiences in the Klondike gold rush. When it did, *Klondike Women* by Melanie Mayer was a series of short sketches of a variety of non-Native women who participated in the gold rush. The same year that *Klondike Women* appeared, Barbara Kelcey completed a master's

thesis at the University of Victoria, entitled "Lost in the Rush: The Forgotten Women of the Klondike Gold Rush." Together these two studies pointed the way toward a new approach to gold rush history. Both studies emphasized the theme of women overlooked and neglected in the story of the Klondike. Mayer's and Kelcey's work clearly suggested the need for further research, a call answered by several subsequent writers similarly bent on proving that many white women participated in the "last great gold rush" and that the majority did so without resorting to prostitution. Ann Brennan's *The Real Klondike Kate*, Margaret Cantwell's *North to Share*, and Frances Backhouse's *Women of the Klondike* are all variations on this theme. Brennan attempts to show that Katherine Ryan, who shared a pseudonym with a famous dance hall performer, was a hard working and morally upstanding woman from Nova Scotia. Cantwell, for her part, uncritically chronicles the important contributions of the Sisters of Saint Ann in Alaska and the Yukon. Backhouse's account resembles Mayer's earlier study, providing thumbnail sketches and biographies of (with one or two exceptions) non-Native women from a variety of occupational backgrounds. The overall pattern in this second wave of writers is to portray middle-class, white women as the "real" pioneers of the Yukon, the women who popular historians had systematically overlooked in favour of the stereotypical dance hall girls. The exception to this pattern is Claire Murphy and Jane Haigh's *Gold Rush Women*, a series of biographical sketches like the others, but one that includes a significant number of working class and Aboriginal women.<sup>3</sup>

Writing about the previously ignored role of middle-class white women left the field wide open for a reexamination of the Klondike prostitute, a call taken up by Bay Ryley and Lael Morgan. Ryley's short book *Gold Diggers of the Klondike*, a revised version of her master's thesis, is an examination of the social, legal, and physical lives of Klondike prostitutes. Based on the findings of the earlier studies, and adding police, court, and other government records, Ryley is less concerned about the stereotypes of Klondike women and focuses instead on examining the changing legal structures within which Klondike prostitutes and their clients negotiated trade in sex. Morgan's *Good Time Girls of the Alaska-Yukon Gold Rush* likewise focuses on

the stories of "sporting" women and their northern clientele, through several gold rushes in the Yukon and Alaska. Morgan's account employs a wealth of anecdote and local lore from Dawson, Fairbanks, and other northern gold rush communities, leaving us with a smorgasbord of experiences, but little to draw the themes together.<sup>4</sup>

My own work builds on these studies and others in an attempt to create a larger context for women's lives in the Yukon during the gold rush period. *Gamblers and Dreamers* documents some of the differences between Native and non-Native women's experiences in the Klondike, and analyzes the very clear gender, class, and ethnic divisions within Dawson City during the Klondike rush. By focusing on five main components of the community: Native people, miners and labourers, sex trade workers, social and religious leaders, as well as business and professional people, I discovered that Native women found themselves deliberately and systematically excluded from Klondike society, even when married to well-respected non-Native men. I showed that there were a great many racial and cultural sub-groups in Dawson and that these groups formed important networks for men, women, and families in the early years of the rush. Furthermore, it turned out that most prostitutes, despite their "good time" reputations, teetered on the edge of economic ruin and lived within a red light district that was distinctly hierarchical in nature. Overall, my study pointed to a layered complexity within northern Canadian society - something previous historians had hinted at but not documented.<sup>5</sup>

Beginning from the long-overdue assumption that Yukon history is more than Klondike history, Dawn Nickel investigated the history of women in the 1940s and 1950s. Her master's thesis, entitled "Realities and Reflections: Women and the Yukon Frontier During the Alaska Highway Period," is an analysis of women's roles during the construction of the Alaska highway and women's participation in the myriad social changes that accompanied that historic construction project. Significantly, she finds that Yukon women demonstrated a strong sense of pride in their contributions to the project and highlights the importance of taking both gender and ethnicity into account in northern history.

Although most of the writing about women

in the Yukon has focused on non-Native women, Julie Cruikshank has used her skills as an anthropologist to produce a body of ethnohistorical work on Yukon Native women. In *Life Lived Like a Story*, Cruikshank broke new ground and has forever changed how we approach the study of women's history, oral history, Native history, and biography. Cruikshank spent many years with the First Nations people in the southern Yukon and by doing so she established close relationships with members of the local community. It is in those relationships that we find the real strengths of her study. *Life Lived Like a Story* is a collaborative work with three First Nations women elders: Kitty Smith, Angela Sidney, and Annie Ned. In it we hear Native women in their own voices telling the stories of their families, their communities, their cultures, and ultimately (if we listen carefully enough) their own lives. Cruikshank offers her interpretations and explanations of events, issues, and themes in the individual women's stories, but she never interrupts them. Their narratives run parallel to hers, overlapping in places and occasionally repeating certain ideas, a technique that ultimately demonstrates the interconnectedness of people, nature, and spirituality. It is a splendid example of how academic inquiry need not interrupt the integrity of oral history.<sup>6</sup>

Life stories and oral history have proven successful in documenting northern women's lives, but the more traditional craft of biography has been little exploited. There were thousands of fascinating women who lived and traveled throughout the arctic and subarctic over the past two centuries, but there exist only a few recent full-length biographies of their lives. One of these is the life of North America's best known female prospector. In *Nellie Cashman, Prospector and Trailblazer*, Suzann Ledbetter covers Cashman's girlhood journey from Ireland to California, then leads us through her mining career in Arizona, British Columbia, the Yukon, and Alaska. Another is the biography of Faith Fenton, "head of the lady journalists in Toronto" in the 1890s, who spent an extended period of her life in the Yukon. Her story, chronicled in Jill Downie's *A Passionate Pen*, demonstrates how one woman's northern sojourn changed her life in dramatic ways. Third is Gwyneth Hoyle's new study of the life of Isobel Hutchison, *Flowers in the Snow*. Hutchison was an

independent and highly-mobile English naturalist who traveled, studied, and wrote about the arctic in the 1920s and 1930s. Hutchison's life in the arctic was one lived almost entirely with men, something that seemed to bother her not at all, yet caused a great deal of consternation to the Northwest Mounted Police. These three biographies mark the beginning of rich possibilities for examining northern women's life stories.<sup>7</sup>

While the Yukon seems to have provided the most fertile ground for women's history, writing on women's northern experience in the NWT, Nunavut, and the provincial norths is also growing. On the provincial norths there exist a few excellent case studies, most notably Meg Luxton's study of Flin Flon, Manitoba, and more recently, Nancy Forestell's study of northern Ontario. Luxton, a sociologist, studied three generations of women in a northern Manitoba mining town and created the first longitudinal study (1927-77) of northern women's work and family patterns in northern Canada. The changes Luxton documented were important ones: domestic abuse continued to be common feature of northern life; women continued to be responsible for the lion's share of the domestic work even as their work expanded outside the home; traditional male and female roles were strictly enforced both socially and economically. More than a decade later Nancy Forestell created a detailed and complex examination of the multi-ethnic, gendered lives of the residents of Timmins, Ontario in the opening years of the twentieth century. Forestell discovers that ethnicity and class had a profound impact on the constructions of masculine and feminine identities in this gold mining community and offers an excellent model for further community studies of mining towns. In answer to Forestell's call for more studies of women in northern Ontario came Margaret Kechnie and Marge Reitsma-Street's anthology *Changing Lives: Women in Northern Ontario* in 1996. Historians Varpu Lindstrom, Karen Blackford, Karen Dubinsky, Nancy Forestell, Ian Radforth, and others come together here to provide examinations of women's work, lives, and culture in the resource-based communities of northern Ontario. By focusing solely on women in northern Ontario, *Changing Lives* demonstrates the need for historians to attempt a synthesis of women's northern experiences; to explain how northern Ontario and

Manitoba women's lives are different and similar to other northern women's experiences; and to fully include northern women in the provincial and national histories of women and in Canadian history generally.<sup>8</sup>

For the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, Canada's largest political units, there exist only a few studies that focus on women. The reasons for this situation are relatively obvious: there are as yet no universities with graduate programs in history or women's studies programs in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut. Add to that the expense and difficulty of northern travel from southern universities, and the problem is further magnified. Finally, since the arctic regions are almost totally ignored in survey and upper division history courses in Canadian universities, few students have come to ask questions relating to women's (or men's) experiences in the arctic.

Happily, there are two recent exceptions to this situation, which point the way to further study. The first is Barbara Kelcey's doctoral dissertation entitled "Jingo Belles, Jingo Belles, Dashing Through the Snow," in which she compares the difference between colonial women in tropical climes with women in the arctic between 1867-1939, documenting nearly 500 non-Native women who traveled through or resided in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut in the period. Strongly influenced by environmental determinism, Kelcey discovers that while many women carried ideas of Empire and imperialism with them into the arctic, the conditions they met there often forced them to adapt their ideology and behavior. In this process, Kelcey uncovered a wealth of previously unknown sources - both published and unpublished - chronicling women's experiences as scientists, missionaries, medical professionals, wives, and leisured travelers in the exploration and settlement of the Canadian arctic. It is an important jumping off point for it offers an amazing number of possibilities for further inquiry into non-Native women's arctic experiences.<sup>9</sup>

Equally unique in focus and method is Evelyn Zeller's recent doctoral dissertation "Violence Against Inuit Women in the Canadian Eastern Arctic." Zeller employs oral testimony, justice records, and women's shelter reports to examine the history of domestic abuse in Inuit communities on Baffin Island in a contemporary

setting. This study is an important step in creating the full context for the implications of social and economic change in women's lives in the North, although her findings suggest that Inuit wife assault is a phenomenon that predates white contact.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, following in the footsteps of her mentor Julie Cruikshank, Nancy Wachowich collaborates with the women who are at once her subjects, her informants, and ultimately her co-authors. Together they have produced a volume called *Saqiyuq: Stories from the Lives of Three Inuit Women*.<sup>11</sup> Like Cruikshank, Wachowich offers us life stories of three Aboriginal women, this time Inuit women from Baffin Island. Unlike *Life Lived Like a Story*, however, the women in *Saqiyuq* represent three generations of one family, thus offering Wachowich a rare opportunity to document and reveal changes in women's lives in new and innovative ways. "Saqiyuq" is an Inuktitut word for a strong wind that changes directions while maintaining velocity. Like the wind, the threads of these women's lives are also shifting and changing, but the women persevere despite adversity, heartache, and phenomenal social change. Wachowich introduces the women, explains their relationships to one another, and describes some of the economic, gendered, and political changes that took place on Baffin Island in the past century. Then she steps back and lets the women speak for themselves.

Although there have been a number of recent publications documenting and interpreting women's northern experiences, northern women's lives remain relatively under-studied in Canada. Case studies of women's experiences in resource towns such as Norman Wells, Tuktoyaktuk, and Fort McMurray remain unwritten. Native and non-Native women's roles in the emergence of Yellowknife, Whitehorse, and Iqaluit as administrative centers remain undocumented. The historical experience of Native women and cultural change in Resolute Bay, Old Crow, and Baker Lake remain unspoken.

Together, Cruikshank and Wachowich's collaborative work with Aboriginal women offers the most original and creative examples for understanding and documenting northern women's lives. By employing ethnohistorical tools and creating a collaborative methodological framework, they offer us new ways of seeing and sharing northern women's historical experiences. I hope and expect that other scholars will undertake similar studies and/or create even more innovative models to enrich the scholarship about northern women's experiences - both Native and non-Native. The sources are there, the women are there, and the market for books is certainly there. All that remains is for historians to ask the questions that will invite northern Canadian women to come in from cold and share their stories.

## ENDNOTES

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2. Martha Louise Black, *My Ninety Years* (Edmonds, Wash.: Alaska Northwest, 1976); Laura Berton, *I Married the Klondike* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1954); Anna DeGraf, *Pioneering on the Yukon, 1882-1917* (Hamden, CN: Archon Books, 1992); Victoria Moessner and Joanne Gates, eds., *The Alaska-Klondike Diary of Elizabeth Robins* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1999); Jane Jacobs, ed., *A Schoolteacher in Old Alaska: The Story of Hannah Breece* (Toronto: Random House, 1995); Agnes Deans Cameron, *The New North* (Saskatoon: Western Produce Prairie Books, 1986); I.S. MacLaren and Lisa LaFramboise, eds., *The Ladies, the Gwich'in, and the Rat: Travels on the Athabasca, Mackenzie, Rat, Porcupine and Yukon Rivers in 1926* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1998); W. Gillies Ross, *This Distant and Unsurveyed Country: A Woman's Winter at Baffin Island, 1857-58* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997).

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4. Bay Ryley, *Gold Diggers of the Klondike* (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer, 1997); Lael Morgan, *Good Time Girls of the Alaska-Yukon Gold Rush* (Fairbanks: Epicenter Press, 1998).
  5. Charlene Porsild, *Gamblers and Dreamers: Women, Men, and Community in the Klondike* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998).
  6. Julie Cruikshank, in collaboration with Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned, *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990).
  7. Suzann Ledbetter, *Nellie Cashman, Prospector and Trailblazer* (El Paso: Texas University Press, 1993); Jill Downie, *A Passionate Pen: The Life and Times of Faith Fenton* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1996); Gwyneth Hoyle, *Flowers in the Snow* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, forthcoming spring 2001).
  8. Meg Luxton, *More Than a Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women's Work in the Home* (Toronto: Women's Educational Press, 1980); Nancy Forestell, "All That Glitters is not Gold: The Gendered Dimensions of Work, Family and Community Life in the Northern Ontario Goldmining Town of Timmins, 1909-1950" (PhD dissertation, Queen's University, 1993); Margaret Kechnie and Marge Reitsma-Street, eds., *Changing Lives: Women in Northern Ontario* (Toronto: Dundurn, 1996).
  9. Barbara Kelcey, "Jingo Belles, Jingo Belles, Dashing Through the Snow: White Women and Empire on Canada's Arctic Frontier," (PhD dissertation, University of Manitoba, 1994.)
  10. Evelyn Zeller, "Violence Against Inuit Women in the Canadian Eastern Arctic." (PhD dissertation, Simon Fraser University, 1999.)
  11. Nancy Wachowich, in collaboration with Apphia Agalakti Awa, Rhoda Kaukjak Katsak, and Sandra Pikujak Katsak, *Saqiyuq: Stories from the Lives of Three Inuit Women* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999).