

Feminism, History and Writing British Columbia's Past

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how three generations of historians have brought the insights of feminism to bear on British Columbia's past. In the early twentieth-century, feminist historians celebrated white women's role in colonization; in the 1970s they asserted that "women were there"; in the past two decades they have turned their attention to the relationship among gender, race, and class. We can build on this history, I argue, by addressing the critiques of anti-racist feminism and demonstrating the centrality of gender to British Columbian history as a whole.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article discute comment trois générations d'historiens ont démontré les effets des idées du féminisme sur le passé de la Colombie-britannique. Au début du vingtième siècle, les historiennes féministes célébraient le rôle des femmes blanches durant la colonisation; durant les années 70, elles ont affirmé que "les femmes étaient là"; au cours des deux dernières décennies elles ont porté leur attention sur la relation entre les sexes, la race et la classe. Nous pouvons ajouter à cette histoire. J'affirme en adressant les critiques anti-racistes féministes et en démontrant la centralité des sexes à l'histoire de la Colombie-britannique dans l'ensemble.

Three generations of feminist historians have disputed, in different ways, the province of British Columbia's reputation as a society defined solely by rough landscape and rougher men. This feminist scholarship has not gone entirely unheeded by the mainstream of regional historiography, but a selective review suggests that the impact of feminist theory, analysis, and research on the writing of British Columbian history could be much more significant. Feminism's limited influence ultimately belies both the sustained development of feminist history in British Columbia and its potential to enrich and transform our understandings of the Pacific past.

Feminism and British Columbian history did not suddenly come together in the 1960s. If we define feminism broadly as critical and systematic analyses of gender difference and power and conceptualize history to encompass works produced outside of the professional academy, we can identify a first phase in the impact of feminism on British Columbian history beginning in the early twentieth-century. Its primary authors were women who Jean Barman aptly dubs "experiential historians."¹ Their work is marked by the influence of first-wave feminism, with its attendant emphasis on women's moral superiority and its embeddedness

in notions of racial superiority.² Novels such as Frances Herring's *Nan and Other Pioneer Women of the West*, published in 1913, and histories such as Nellie de Bertrand Lugin's *Pioneer Women of Vancouver Island*, published in 1924,³ are fundamentally concerned with exploring and celebrating white women's roles as pioneers and community-builders. Their racial politics are explicit rather than implicit. Both Lugin and Herring cheerfully celebrate white women's centrality to "civilizing" First Nations people and territory and constraining the excesses of white men in frontier settings.

Feminism's impact on British Columbian history became less visible in the mid-twentieth century, reflecting the declining fortunes of the organized women's movement in Canada. In the 1970s historians renewed the sustained and explicitly political campaign of recovering the female past. This effort produced works shaped as much by second-wave feminism as Lugin and Herring were by first-wave feminist politics. In Canada, second-wave feminism emphasized reproductive freedom and workplace issues and operated within a largely liberal framework, although one that was constantly challenged and occasionally overtaken by socialist-feminism. With

these priorities, British Columbian scholars assembled some of Canada's first volumes specifically devoted to exploring women's history: *In Her Own Right* (1980) and *Not Just Pin Money* (1984).⁴ Both collections include work ranging in form from academic essays to collected notes. In focussing on work, political representation, labour protest, reproductive freedom, and trade unionism, these collections respond both to the general concerns of second-wave feminism in Canada and the specific connections between the women's movement and trade unionism in British Columbia. Their vision of women's history is substantially more inclusive than that of their foremothers, with *Not Just Pin Money* expanding its operative definition of women's history to include Chinese, East Asian, and Aboriginal women.

The first and second phase of the feminist historiography of British Columbia share important commonalities as well as differences. Neither was a wholly professional enterprise: Herring and Lugin were not trained historians, and the contributors sections of *In Her Own Right* and *Not Just Pin Money* suggest that women's history continued to be written by authors with diverse occupations and training. And certainly some of the themes and genres of the first phase persist into the second. Both generations of scholarship are especially united by a common concern for proving women's centrality to various episodes in the British Columbian past - for asserting, in other words, that "women were there." This goal, shared by historians of women throughout the Western world, was rendered especially urgent by the overwhelmingly masculinist orientation of British Columbian historiography and iconography. While less explicitly bound up with notions of race and civilization, works by pioneer researchers Elizabeth Forbes and, more recently, Marnie Anderson are, like their long-ago predecessors, popular, informal histories primarily concerned with lauding white women's roles as pioneer British Columbians.⁵ Kathryn Bridge's two recent volumes combine these interests with a more sophisticated research base and understanding of the British Columbian past.⁶

The late 1980s ushered in a third phase in the impact of feminism on the writing of British Columbian history. Rather than asserting the presence of women in various episodes of the British Columbian past, feminist historians of the

third phase began, in the words of Veronica Strong-Boag and Gillian Creese, to "problematize gender for women and men."⁷ This phase thus aimed, at root, to investigate how gender shaped the entirety of British Columbia's past. It did not lead to a wholesale abandonment of *women* as a topic. To be sure, a few studies of masculinity emerged, but on the whole, feminist historiography in British Columbia remained focussed on women, although works such as the essays collected in a 1995 *BC Studies* special issue on "Women's History and Gender Studies" evince a more nuanced conceptualization of the relationship between gender and womanhood.⁸ In its dual recognition of the significance of gender and of the specificity and oppression of women, British Columbian historiography belies the anxious dichotomy drawn between *women's* and *gender* history in a recent debate in the pages of *left history*.⁹

This third phase was built not only on changing imperatives of feminist scholarship, but also on increasing levels of institutional support. By the early 1990s, each of the province's three universities boasted Women Studies' programmes. The "BC and Beyond: Gender Histories" Conference held at the University of Victoria in 1993 and the subsequent formation of the Women's History Network/BC indicate that feminist historians were finding institutional moorings. Increasing professionalization and institutional support was accompanied by its inevitable companion, growing distance from grassroots politics. Yet feminist histories of British Columbia have not lost their political orientation. The continuing dominance of article-length studies further suggests that feminist historians of British Columbia continue to work under conditions of limited security within the academy. As Teresa Healey points out, much useful scholarship on women in British Columbia continues to languish unpublished.¹⁰

Historians of this third phase are at their best when analysing how gender operates in conjunction with race and class. In doing so, they build on socialist-feminist theory of the 1970s and 1980s, the growing body of anti-racist feminist scholarship, and local debates about the relative significance of class and race. Alicja Muszynski's analysis of the fisheries probes the connections between gender, race, and labour for British

Columbians, white, Asian, and Aboriginal, male and female, while Gillian Creese's study of labour politics in Vancouver explores the highly gendered character of British Columbia's labour markets and movements.¹¹ Jean Barman, Carol Cooper, Jo-Anne Fiske, and Sylvia Van Kirk analyse how gender and race coalesced to shape First Nations women's lives and the various imperial attempts to regulate them.¹² Historians such as Myra Rutherdale are beginning to ask questions about how white women were racialized in the process of colonial contact.¹³ In their attention to multiple axes of identity and oppression, historians of British Columbia have much to contribute to Central Canadian historiography that, while forthcoming on the interaction between class and gender, is only begging to explore the connections between gender and race.

That words such as "image," "discourse," "construction," and "representation" appear so regularly in these studies suggests the limits as well as the possibilities of this third-phase in the feminist history of British Columbia. Recent scholarship on gender and race especially shares an emphasis on how the mainstream sees the margin, or on how the powerful refract the powerless. The partiality of their scope is a strength rather than a weakness: as Joy Parr argues, one of the primary contributions of gender history has been its insistence on the necessarily fragmentary character of the historical enterprise.¹⁴ There is nothing to be gained, and much to be lost, by claiming that a study of Aboriginal women as seen in European records is a meaningful study of the Aboriginal women themselves, or that it should be one. Acknowledging the limits of our vision should not lead us to accept a historical literature that deals only or even largely with the views of the powerful, literate, and articulate.

Issues of voice, representation, and perspective are vexing ones for historians. Our theoretical and political goals are always checked by the fact that we are so necessarily and irreparably limited by the available sources. It is well and good to demand a history of Aboriginal women that does more than analyse how others saw them, but it is much harder to locate the sources necessary to substantiate one. Such problems demand innovations in feminist historical practice and methodology rather than quiescence. Feminist

histories of British Columbia will be impoverished until more historians are themselves drawn from the ethnic, racial, and cultural communities they study. This is not to posit a simplistic argument about appropriation and voice, nor is it to call for a return to notions of a universal female past and omniscient historical vision. It is only to acknowledge that history is richer when its practitioners possess the language skills, cultural know-how, and community connections that let us locate and reckon with historical records - written, oral, visual, or material - that will help us craft a historiography that is as multiracial and multicultural as our history. Language profoundly shapes human experience, and to know a people only through the language of their colonizers, spectators, or oppressors replicates rather than challenges the distance between them.¹⁵ There is only so much to be learned from reading sources "against the grain." Diversifying the historical profession and our historical practice are the necessary first steps toward creating a feminist history that does more than tell us about white folks and their views.

Ethnohistorical methodology and collaborative research suggest another possible avenue out of the eternal trap of forever analysing the *analyses* of women, especially First Nations ones. Julie Cruikshank, in collaboration with Anglea Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned, has produced *Life Lived Like a Story*, an especially fine and subtle analysis of three Athapaskan and Tlingit women and story-telling. Andrea Laforet and Annie York's study of Spuzzum suggests another way that we might do cross-cultural research that is at once historical, respectful, and engaged.¹⁶ Both *Life Lived Like a Story* and *Spuzzum* acknowledge the authorial presence of both Aboriginal teacher and non-Aboriginal researcher. In doing so, they avoid the subsumation of Indigenous knowledge by Western scholars under the guise of the ethnographical informant and also bypass the curious erasure that underlies "as told to" autobiographies such as *Stoney Creek Woman*.¹⁷ Neither *Life Lived Like a Storey* nor *Spuzzum* solve what Jeanette Armstrong has aptly called the "culture gap" that has separated and continues to separate Aboriginal and white and their ways of history-telling in British Columbia, and they raise new and troubling questions about authorial intentions.¹⁸ But at least they meaningfully engage

with the trenchant First Nations critiques of how scholars have understood and more often misunderstood their culture.

We can build on the strengths of this third phase by more profoundly incorporating the insights of anti-racist feminism and by continuing to stress the significance of gender to the history of British Columbia writ large. To be sure, mainstream British Columbian historiography has not gone unmoved by the claims and demands of this third phase of feminist scholarship. General histories such as Jean Barman's *The West Beyond the West*, First Nations histories such as Mary Ellen Kelm's *Colonized Bodies*, and community studies such as Robert A.J. McDonald's *Making Vancouver* seriously strive to account for the experience of both men and women.¹⁹ Yet the bulk of British Columbian historiography remains largely untransformed by feminist insight on the gendered character of the human past and historical vision. This point becomes clearer as there is more and more British Columbian history to analyse. While it was often difficult to integrate British Columbia into the dominant themes of social history in the 1970s and early 1980s - industrialization, urbanization, and the like - recent interest in themes of race, state formation, and space has helped find British Columbia a more conspicuous place in the national and international literatures.

Within the relatively under-studied context of British Columbia, the handful of monographs on women's history in the nineteenth-century has clearly had an impact, most notably in demolishing the notion of a harmonious frontier society. While works such as Richard Mackie's *Trading Beyond the Mountains* utilize a fairly traditional, positivist methodology,²⁰ post-structuralist and post-colonial analysis has proven particularly influential in this re-interpretation. Historians such as Tina Loo and Elizabeth Vibert, geographers such as Cole Harris, and literary scholars such as Christopher Bracken each use critical theory to trace the contours of conflict, struggle, and contestation in British Columbia's past.²¹ With the important exception of Vibert, who offers a compelling analysis of the gendered constructions of First Nations and Europeans during the Cordellian fur trade, none of these authors uses gender as a central category of analysis.

Each of these studies could be enriched by more careful attention to feminist analyses about the importance of images and practices of femininity and masculinity to nineteenth-century society. Mackie's chapter on "The Native Foundation of Trade and Labour" recognizes the importance of Aboriginal women's labour, but is dogged by a literal reading of primary sources steeped in the language of female savagery and drudgery, and his attention to gender largely stops there. Bracken's quixotic treatment of "postalcolonialism" and the potlatch acknowledges the connections between attacks on First Nations' marriage practices and potlatches and suggests how much mileage white critics got from, in post-colonial critic Gayatri Spivak's words, purporting "'to save brown women from brown men,'" but never treats these insights as fundamental to the potlatch's critics and champions alike. Tina Loo's rich analysis of the law and state formation in colonial British Columbia never really reckons with the deeply masculinist character of nineteenth-century state formation, a fact that is central rather than peripheral to its history. Similarly, Cole Harris' thoughtful - and often re-thought - essays on colonialism and geographical change pay some heed to the gendered nature of cultural contact, yet he articulates these insights as additional rather than central to the colonization of British Columbia.

Feminism and the history of British Columbia have a future as well as a past. There is much we do not know about women, men, and British Columbia. The twentieth-century as a whole continues to go under-studied, and with it withers important topics such as lesbian history. The impact of anti-racist feminist scholarship, while significant, still has much more to offer scholars of multi-racial, colonial societies such as British Columbia. Feminist historians, I think, can build on the three phases by continuing to explore how gender has shaped the lives and experiences of all British Columbians, while not forgetting that the meaning and experience of gender has been cut on the hard edges of race, class, and sexuality. Perhaps then mainstream regional historiography will use the insights of feminist scholarship to move beyond insights about gender to analyses of gender, and reckon with the extent to which gender has shaped both the British Columbian past and has moulded our vision of it.

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ENDNOTES

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2. On this, see M. Valverde, "'When the Mother of the Race is Free': Race, Reproduction, and Sexuality in First-Wave Feminism," *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History*, ed. F. Iacovetta and M. Valverde (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).
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