

Introduction

Maritime Women: A Place of Their Own Cultural and Literary Traditions and Change

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Twenty years ago *Atlantis* was founded by a group of women based at Acadia University, Wolfville, Nova Scotia. At the time it was an outrageously optimistic project: to establish and maintain, at a small Maritime university, a Canadian Women's Studies journal with a national and international audience. However, with the talent and dedicated work of many women, the journal thrived and grew. Eventually it found a home at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax where it has evolved into the new *Atlantis* of Fall, 1995.

On the eve of its twentieth anniversary, it seems appropriate that this special issue is devoted to Maritime women. The articles grew out of a 1992 conference, the third Raddall Symposium, organized around the theme of Maritime women and their relationship to cultural tradition and change. It involved many stories of women finding or creating a place of their own; ie., a culturally visible and viable space within a geographically defined region. Within this region are complex cultural diversities reflected in the conference by the range of participants: Acadians, Nova Scotia blacks, Mi'kmaq; artists and academics; filmmakers and rug-hookers; story-tellers and myth-makers.

This selection of papers from that conference gives some sense of that celebratory moment. However, because of the non-print form of some of the presen-

tations and because of the necessary limits of print reproduction, there are some noticeable absences from the text. This selection is not so much representative as suggestive of the multi-faceted and multi-disciplined approach needed to explore and understand the relations of some women to cultural production and reproduction. Through attention to specificity and detail, the articles implicitly or explicitly challenge the masculinist construction of Maritime history and cultural studies as well as certain truths and half-truths generated by feminist historians and scholars. Some of the articles, for example, complement the work done by Naomi Griffiths in *The Splendid Vision, Centennial History of the National Council of Women of Canada, 1893-1993* (1993). In her introduction to that volume, Griffiths critiques the "pernicious half-truth" that, in the past, women's lives had no public component. She also challenges the "enduring prejudice against middle and upper class women whose lives were based upon the family" and who were active in volunteer organizations. These kinds of challenges are essential to the on-going process of understanding women's lives as well as their relations to the dynamics of cultural formation and configuration.

Changing Attitudes

In the first section, Gwendolyn Davies, Suzanne

Morton, and Barry Moody examine the educational and social variables of some women's lives over a 150 year period. Davies deals with the "social imperatives of female education in eighteenth and nineteenth century Nova Scotia." She combines research on the individual lives of women who attended and/or ran private schools with an analysis of an increasing public acceptance of the importance of educating women to take their place in the world. These changing attitudes are part of a more general educational reform movement, influenced by such thinkers as Pestalozzi.

For many middle class women, education was both a metaphorical and literal "lifeline". If a husband died without leaving adequate provision for his family or the family fortune was lost, women often found themselves at the mercy of circumstances, especially as they got older. Davies shows how some women were able to open schools and survive economically. However, she also notes the case of Dame Allen who, when she was too old to teach, had to be rescued from poverty by the compassion of her former students.

Suzanne Morton's article deals with the material conditions of older women in Nova Scotia between 1881-1931. Surprisingly, she finds that elderly women, although they outnumbered elderly men and were mostly very poor, were unlikely to end their days in the poorhouse. Partly this was because Maritime families tended to care for their own well into the twentieth century. This familial care was usually better than life in the dreaded poorhouse but could also lead to problems familiar to modern readers: elder abuse and a sense of helplessness and vulnerability on the part of the old people.

Morton discusses the methodological difficulties of changing definitions; for example, when is a woman old? She also has some fascinating observations to make about the influence of stereotypes in the political and literary culture of the region. She concludes that the archetype of the Old Woman is powerful in the symbolic realm but she is largely without power in

her material conditions.

While the spectre of poverty continued to haunt the working class and older women, the lives of younger middle class women were changing as they entered universities and colleges in greater numbers in the early part of the twentieth century. Barry Moody uses autobiographical material, the college letters of Esther Clark from 1912-1916, to examine the lives of a generation of young women collectively labelled the "New Girl". These particular New Girls do not experience their lives as a sharp break with traditional patterns and beliefs. While Moody suggests this may have something to do with the more conservative social and religious patterns of the Maritime region, it may also be more typical of young women's attitudes and experiences than previous scholars have suggested. In the letters we see Clark's attempt to blend the old and the new, the family and private life with the sense of a public role for herself and her generation. This sense of continuity enables a rather exceptional young woman to react to social change with exuberance and confidence.

"Strength in Union"

The second section deals with women's social affiliations, networks, and organizations. Sharon MacDonald, Jennifer James, and Lorraine Coops examine how social organizations provide space for the dynamic interactions between women's private and public lives.

MacDonald's discussion of the Young Ladies Club of Baddeck, Nova Scotia (later called The Bell Club) shows how a relatively informal organization has proven more durable than other, more officially structured ones. The Bell Club was part of the women's cultural club movement in North America during the last half of the nineteenth century but it also reflected the specific cultural context of a small, relatively isolated village where the influence of one family, the Bells, was enormous. Although much work has been

done on Alexander Graham Bell, there has been little serious study of his deaf wife, Mabel Bell. According to MacDonald, it was Mabel who inspired the founding of the Club and encouraged this group of village women to pursue intellectual interests collectively in a public space. MacDonald draws on Club records going back 100 years as well as interviews with living Club members to offer some insight into the intergenerational continuity of this special form of women bonding and learning together in their own place.

Ada Silver Powers was 60 years old when she travelled from Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, to London, England, to attend the World Women's Christian Temperance Union Convention in 1920. Using two journals written by Power, Jennifer James creates a portrait of a "feminist activist and reformer" in this post-war period. Although the National Council of Women of Canada and the Equal Franchise League were active at this time, James claims that the WCTU was more accessible to many white, middle class women in the Maritimes with its conservative and Christian-ecumenical traditions. The WCTU was not, however, a parochial institution. James highlights the sense of international sisterhood which cut across class and race divisions at the Convention. The American women, in particular, were celebrating 50 years of hard political work culminating in the triumph of the prohibition legislation in the U.S. This is a world radically different from that of the so-called Lost Generation. The women of the Convention have not lost faith; they are confident of their ability to shape a better world and transmit their values to a young generation.

Another conservative institution, the International Order of the Daughters of the Empire, provides the focus for Lorraine Coops' study of women's participation in volunteer organizations. Coops concentrates on the Sir Robert Borden Chapter, in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, between 1915-1965. She also provides background on the national organization founded by

Margaret Polson Murray in 1900 to "provide field comforts to Canadian troops serving in the Boer War and to promote, through women's patriotic service to their country, Canada's ties with Great Britain and the Empire." Coops views the national organization as reflecting a "changing Anglo-Canadian nationalism" but notes that local chapters adapted the goals to their specific needs. In the case of Wolfville, the needs were those of a small, largely rural, predominantly Baptist community in the Annapolis Valley. In addition to their patriotic efforts, the Wolfville women were concerned about local education, health and poverty. They raised funds to supply small rural schools with equipment (and flags) and, in 1920, obtained the services of a VON nurse for the area.

While acknowledging the I.O.D.E.'s resistance to change, Coops makes a strong case for the positive influence of conservative organizations in giving members a sense of "Strength in Union" and a place in which to make local, regional, national and international connections.

Enduring Creations

This section on Maritime artists and writers begins with the poems of Rita Joe, the well-known Mi'kmaw poet. The poet's sense of continuity of her people's culture over thousands of years in this region places in perspective the more recent cultural production of white women discussed in the following papers. Her sense of connections within community and between generations suggests a stability which enables the individual to survive both racism and the changes signaled by the fact of her daughters going to university.

Connections within community and communal creation are also the theme of Laura McLauchlan and Joan Young's article on Nova Scotian hooked rugs. Hand-hooked rugs with a burlap backing have been made in the Maritimes for well over a century. This populist rural art began as a functional craft and quickly

evolved into cultural “texts” created by women from the scraps and rags of their everyday lives. In turn, professional modern women artists have appropriated and incorporated the form and techniques for their own creations. Nancy Edell, the creator of this issue’s cover, “Blomidon Cow”, hooks her own designs and often displays them side-by-side with her paintings, thus effectively blurring the official culture’s distinctions between high art forms and popular culture and crafts.

Are hooked rug makers folk artists? Who are the folk anyhow? Ian McKay, in *The Quest of the Folk* (1994) has deconstructed these problematic categories and shown how the masculinization of the Folk in Nova Scotia, in the early and mid-twentieth century, was based on a concept of natural gender roles which placed women in the home while the menfolk were out making a living on the land or in fishing boats or lumber camps. Folk culture was seen as springing mostly from these male communities.

Diane Tye, in her article on Katherine Gallagher, the Nova Scotian traditional folksinger, challenges this association of Maritime folksongs with masculine sites and occupations. Instead, she offers a “female transmitted tradition passed down from mother to daughter”. Tye uses family interviews and published and unpublished material to suggest that Gallagher’s contribution to folksongs and their transmission in the Maritimes should make us re-evaluate women’s roles in this area.

Re-evaluation is also the focus of the next 3 articles on professional women artists in the Maritimes. In contrast to traditional native and rural culture with its emphases on communal values and collective creations, industrial capitalism and urbanization configured the professional artist who established her reputation through authorship; ie., through the individual production of works of art. Janet Guildford’s article on Maria Morris Miller (1810-1875) is particularly interesting because Miller is regarded as the first Nova Scotia woman to gain recognition as a professional artist and

because Guildford locates her life and career at the locus of the complex cultural shifts which signaled the formation of the middle class in nineteenth century Halifax. Guildford reads Miller’s botanical drawings of Nova Scotia wildflowers as symptomatic of the “separate sphere” of feminine accomplishments but also as signs of the “promotion of the ideology of bourgeois progress with its emphasis on science, patriotism and morality”. Like Naomi Griffiths, Guildford reminds us that we must be careful about generalizations on the relations between the private and public spheres in the lives of women in the nineteenth century.

The articles on Roberta Taylor and Mabel Killam Day move us into the twentieth century with profiles of 2 artists who deserve to be more well-known. These women were professional artists, active both inside and outside the region. Both spent time in New York at art schools and both were influenced by the early modernist art movement. Laurie Glenn provides the New Brunswick context which frames the trajectory of Taylor’s career while Franziska Kruschen traces Killam Day’s delicate balancing act between the demands of marriage and of her artistic vocation.

From visual artists, we move to writers and performers. As the recent publication of her journals has made clear, Lucy Maud Montgomery knew all about such delicate balancing acts. Elizabeth Epperly describes tracking Montgomery through her manuscript revisions, beginning with the famous opening paragraphs of *Anne of Green Gables* and ending with the last novel written after the marriage, the children, the disappointments and the fame. On the back of the manuscript texts are scraps and fragments of Montgomery’s life: she conserved paper by writing on everything that came to hand from her own old manuscripts to household accounts to her personal assessment of her husband’s mental illness. Trying to put together the jig-saw pieces is the scholar’s business and Epperly gives us tantalizing glimpses of

Montgomery's private and professional selves.

Montgomery was famous in her own lifetime and so was Evelyn Eaton, a mid-twentieth century popular fiction writer, but whereas Montgomery's reputation has continued to grow, Eaton's life and work have been almost forgotten. Clara Thomas gives us a glimpse of this fascinating Maritime woman who was presented at court in England but spent the last part of her life on a spiritual quest which began with her own native ancestry and ended with her living in a California commune where she functioned as an elder and a medicine woman. Thomas' article is a challenge to potential biographers and her comments on the cross-influences between writing historical fiction and Hollywood movies during and just after World War II suggest that more attention should be paid to this period of cultural production in Canada.

The final part of section III shifts the focus to contemporary filmmakers/ writers/ performers. Sylvia Hamilton describes the historical and cultural context and aesthetic challenges behind her making of the beautiful and moving film Black Mother Black Daughter. She argues that film is a more appropriate medium for capturing the multi-levelled experiences of Black Nova Scotians than the traditional print culture modes. Those who have been excluded from mainstream history and cultural texts are creating their own texts in other media.

Alternative live theatre is another way of creating texts about and for those who are not usually part of the dominant culture modes. Ric Knowles' study of the Mulgrave Road Co-op Theatre combines feminist theory with a specific analysis of the role of women in relation to the Co-op's productions and tours. Based in Guysborough County, Nova Scotia, the company

has established a reputation for fostering Maritime talent and producing plays that reflect shifting cultural patterns and deal with such subjects as rural poverty. Knowles discusses how their collective approach to theatre has been especially congenial for women writers/ performers directors.

In the final 2 articles, David Creelman and Janice Kulyk-Keefer offer critical readings of two fiction writers: Nancy Bauer, based in New Brunswick, and Budge Wilson who lives in Nova Scotia. Creelman analyses Bauer's development as a novelist, claiming that she is "one of the region's most prolific and innovative writers" and that she has resisted "the formal and thematic structures which have dominated Eastern fiction for much of this century". Kulyk-Keefer returns to the argument in her critical survey of Maritime writing, Under Eastern Eyes, where she insists that "the dominant literary tradition of the Maritimes has inscribed women as 'naturally' silent or as actively hostile to the written word." She therefore takes great delight in Budge Wilson's collection of short stories, The Leaving, which overturns this tradition by showing how women come to be agents rather than receivers of language, subjects rather than objects of cultural production.

To borrow a term from Ric Knowles, this selection of articles "dis-closes" some of the dynamics of cultural change and continuity which characterize the Maritime region from the eighteenth to the late twentieth century. In many cases, looking at these dynamics through the lives and work of women challenges truths and half-truths about gender and its relation to cultural processes. Future cultural studies need to be based on such specific and focused work.

