

became the first woman to preside over the Canadian Historical Association (three others have since followed). Her stern Presbyterianism severely conditioned her feminist leanings, however, as is evident in her address to the Canadian Federation of University Women in August 1952. There she professed to find the battle for equality largely won, leaving only "a mopping up operation"; moreover, although "women in the modern age of their emancipation are intellectually and emotionally competent, as they have always been," they did not fully realize (Neatby thought) the extent either of their capabilities or of their responsibilities.

Neatby's particular field of historical research and publication was the old province of Quebec, not an immediately obvious choice for someone raised on a Saskatchewan homestead. The explanation lies at least in part in the peculiarities, not to say uniqueness, of that redoubtable Neatby homestead, where the father immersed himself in his three-thousand-volume library and the mother drove her large brood of children to achievement and eminence through her ambition and mental toughness. (A brother, Leslie H. Neatby, has sketched this remarkable childhood background in *Chronicle of a Pioneer Prairie Family*, 1979). It would appear from her comments on local historical societies (pp. 102-106) that her lifelong devotion to the preservation of historical documents rather than any consuming attachment to regional concerns led Hilda Neatby to take on the first editorship of *Saskatchewan History*, a post in which she was soon succeeded by L.H. Thomas. Nevertheless, through her devotion to her students and her uncompromising expectations of herself and others she succeeded in controverting her own gloomy comments about the low esteem in which the study of history was held by students and by the general public, so that even though she wrote only one article with a regional focus (on doctors in the Northwest Territories), she established sound scholarly foundations for others to build on.

All told, Hilda Neatby emerges from the pages of this collection a multi-faceted, determined and somewhat daunting figure. Hayden comments, with no unkind intent, that "She was sure of herself and where she stood. She knew that she was right in religion as well as in education, in grammar, style, in salary negotiations—in life" (p. 61). Hayden's balanced yet sympathetic biographical sketch of Neatby is one of the book's bonuses, and his bibliography of all Neatby's writings another, but he is right when he claims with becoming modesty that *So Much To Do, So Little Time* is most important for pulling together the ideas and admonitions of an influential Canadian intellectual. This is indeed a book that "needed to be" (p. 332).

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**The Wilson Sisters: A Biographical Study of Upper Middle-Class Victorian Life.** Martha Westwater. *Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1984 Pp. 250.*

Half way through this book the author describes "the aching bewilderment our Victorian sisters suffered in trying to understand their femininity." By the end, the reader is more apt to share the bewilderment than any enlightenment. What appears to be a fascinating study in upper middle-class womanhood has become a frustrating disappointment. Why?

The answer is threefold and lies in the particular women under scrutiny, the nature of the available evidence, and in the questions asked.

The subjects of enquiry are the six daughters of James Wilson, founder of *The Economist*, politician and Indian civil servant. These Victorian ladies were given only a flimsy formal education but a highly satisfactory informal one. Socially, in England and abroad, they met energetic, intellectual and diverse people who piqued

their curiosity and encouraged intellectual enquiry. A promising group; yet the author repeatedly expresses disappointment in their complacency, their class loyalty, their social and political conservatism and above all in their antisuffrage inclination. Certainly she demonstrates how in childhood and marriage they lacked few material comforts. They had no good reason for financial discontent but they do not emerge as a happy family. Headaches, loneliness, some marital incompatibilities were their lot. This emotional discontent was not translated into a feminist consciousness. They saw no reason to change the structure or the tenor of their own lives and had limited sympathy for the dissatisfactions of other women.

One of their father's friends was William Rathbone Greg. He exercised a profound influence over the whole family, articulating a theory of true womanhood before it was taken up and developed in the 1860's by Ruskin. Biological determinism was the keystone. Women were the weaker sex and must submit to the protection of men. Women were the upholders of the beauty and virtue of the past. While purity, innocence and domesticity must be women's pride and joy, the more fortunate could share their bounty with the poor through individual acts of charity. Politically this meant that men should look after the important public sphere of national politics. Women's (smaller) brains should indeed be trained and educated - for motherhood. The employment of single women was to be tolerated, even encouraged, but a married woman should be devoted to her family. Martha Westwater demonstrates that this theory eventually invested the Wilsons' own comfort, complacency and self-absorption with the dignity of a cause - the antisuffragist cause, whose 1889 manifesto in *Nineteenth Century* three of the sisters signed.

Ironically the Wilsons themselves were living contradictions of this image of woman as lily livered lady. They wrote reviews for *The Econo-*

*mist*, on books in the masculine areas of philosophy, politics, business and economics. They wrote pamphlets and novels, and one sister was a founder member of the Kryle Society, whose object was "to bring beauty to the poor" by decorating public buildings, providing parks, and signing oratorios. Moreover, their performance in womanliness was decidedly unimpressive. Three were childless and those who had children unfeelingly confined them to the care of the servants with an abandon unusual even for the Victorians. The Wilson sisters controlled their own wealth through marriage settlements carefully drawn up by the family patriarch and managed to occupy themselves in European travel, visiting, intellectual pursuits and, as far as Eliza, Walter Bagehot's widow, was concerned, in maintaining an active role in the management of *The Economist*.

Westwater has drawn extensively on Eliza's diary for material, and she has also studied the written works and correspondence of all the sisters. An unusual amount of evidence chronicles the women of this family and, like the author, one hopes for nuggets of gold. This book does not discover the precious metal; but perhaps our objective should be more precisely conceptualised. To millions of Victorians, votes for women was not so self-evidently desirable as it might seem to us. To them, their idea of separate spheres was not particularly abhorrent. To them, their concept of the special and distinct characteristics of woman was a difference to be accepted and cultivated, not denied and eradicated. These intellectual theories however were at odds with the material conditions in the lives not only of poor women but also of the rich. A question which begs to be answered is: How did wealthy, comfortable, intelligent women reconcile these contradictions and make sense of their world? This problem remains to be solved.

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