

Women in New France: Further Reflections

Many thanks to Professor Dumont for her thoughtful comments on "New France: Les Femmes Favorisées" (Atlantis, Spring 1981). She subjects the article to some just criticism. It is probably true that the overall impression the article conveys is a little too rosy. I did not intend to portray an *age d'or* for women, but rather one which (as I wrote in the introduction) "contrasts favourably not only with that of their contemporaries in France and New England but probably also with twentieth century Canadian women as far as entrepreneurial activity is concerned." The advantage, of course, was only a relative one, and a few cautionary paragraphs on the real hardships many women faced would have strengthened the article. However, I assumed that the readership of *Atlantis* would find a discussion of the difficulties of female existence repetitious. If we are to move beyond the history of oppression to discuss women's culture in its many manifestations we must begin to look at the more favourable situations as well as the failures.

Professor Dumont is also right, I think, to note Jean Blain's criticisms of the evidence Lanctôt and Dumas presented about the careful screening of the *Filles du Roi*. Though I was aware of Blain's article I did not give it sufficient weight. Some of his points about Dumas and Lanctôt are well taken. The information about the royal provision of dowries for the *Filles* is drawn not from Dumas but rather from Lanctôt as cited in my article; p. 207 is a misprint and should read p. 202.¹ Our knowledge is also enhanced by the information Professor Dumont supplies about Jeanne Enard, about Fregault's calculation of nun's salaries, and about *Ancien Regime* infanticide. Again, *merci*.

Several points raised by Professor Dumont need clarification. In answer to her question about the economy of New France, it had no single base but three mainstays: fur, agriculture and war. All of these influenced women's position, as I tried to show. It was not intended to portray prostitutes as particularly "favoured"; the point in regard to these women, as well as to women traders found in the western posts, was that the military economy was not a male preserve. There were wives and daughters in the posts as well as *aventurières*; in 1703 Julienne Cullière went west with her husband to trade; in the early 1750's Madame Lefebvre du Chouquet could be found at Fort Rouille and Madame de Contrecoeur at Fort Niagara; Madame de la Perrière and Mademoiselle de la Perrière also shared the officer's posting, as did the fur-trading Madame Lusignan whom Franquet found at Fort St. Frederic. The article did not say that the needlework done at the Ursulines was used as a trade good; rather, that clothing was a major item of trade and needlework, therefore an important skill. I have no quarrel with Micheline D'Allaire's material, for I did not contend that New France was a classless society.

Madeleine de Verchères was presented in my article as a characteristically rowdy member of the *campagnard* nobility whose image was sweetened by later historians who had Victorian sensibilities. I stand by this interpretation. As the footnotes indicated, André Vachon's study in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* was one of the sources used. Vachon modifies but does not overturn the idea of Madeleine as a formidable figure ("ill-tempered," to use his words) rather than a pliant one. From his splendid detective work on the various accounts of Madeleine's exploits, he convincingly argues that the post-1722 account of the Iroquois raid is improbable; yet he seems to attribute this account to Madeleine (p. 309). Even in her more sober 1699 account he sees some exaggeration (p. 311).

Vachon quotes Madeleine's assertions that "like many men, I have feelings which incline me to glory" and that "she had never shed a tear." He reprints, without challenge, La Potherie's claim that de Verchères was a sharpshooter. Vachon modifies but partially accepts (cf. p. 312 in particular) the traditional view of tempestuous relations with *censitaires* and with the clergy. Neither Madeleine's actions nor her words bespeak what Professor Dumont calls "une vision toute traditionnelle du rôle des femmes dans la société." As I tried to point out in the article, a single, clearly defined tradition regarding womanly behaviour simply did not exist in Madeleine's time.

I must also disagree with Professor Dumont's suggestion that women had little power since "On ne trouve aucune femme dans les Conseils de Compagnie et aucune au Conseil Souverain." Were we to gauge the power of *Ancien Régime* women by their access to public office, the story (beyond a few queens and regents) would be quickly told. The reality was better than the formalities. My article cited the cases of some fifteen substantial business women - and that certainly does not exhaust the field. One does not have to probe very deeply beneath the formal exclusion from government to discover the real political power wielded by Mesdames de la Forest, Frontenac and Vaudreuil. In the last case the influence was so striking that the minister Pontchartrain's decisions regarding New France were said to be largely determined by Madame de Vaudreuil's advice. On the popular level, women sought, and sometimes secured, redress for their grievances by rioting, another form of political participation that had nothing to do with sitting on the Sovereign Council.

In regard to the demographic section, I agree that it is the most speculative part of the paper, as the qualified conclusions to this section (p. 91) suggest. We are still awaiting the results of the major reconstruction of the population of French Canada underway at the Université de Montréal.

Preliminary evidence suggests, as Professor Dumont notes, that in many demographic aspects New France approximated other *Ancien Régime* societies. It is for this reason that I looked for the explanation of women's privileged position in demographic characteristics that *were* peculiar to New France: the selective female immigration and the shortage of women during a considerable part of the colony's existence.

The article also receives some broader criticisms. It is argued that the time period chosen for discussion is inappropriate; and that the idea of "*Femmes favorisées*" distorts the actual situation of women in New France. Professor Dumont feels that the article ignores solid evidence about female hardship; and it relies on sources which she does not esteem.

In regard to periodisation, Professor Dumont argues that the position of women changed little with the Conquest. Had she written the article, I gather she would have treated the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a unit and the seventeenth century as a separate, "exceptional" period. While that traditional periodisation is not always relevant for women, I think the argument for new periodisation here is unconvincing. The degree to which the Conquest altered the socio-economic structures of New France is the subject of great controversy. If one accepts Maurice Seguin's argument that the Conquest set French Canada on a path of progressive "ruralisation," then women - who had played an important commercial role - were certainly affected. It may be, as Jose Igartua has suggested, that major commercial changes were delayed until the time of the American Revolution; or that Fernand Ouellet is right in placing real change even later, around the turn of the century. To my knowledge, the jury has not come in yet. In the meanwhile, there are many who would contest Professor Dumont's claim that marrying an English officer was no different than marrying a French one (and quantifiers who might ask how many of these mixed mar-

riages in fact occurred). Though the Conquest may not have dealt a blow to all nuns, M. Trudel's study of the Church during the Military Regime suggests that most were adversely affected. Trudel shows that the largest Order, the Soeurs de la Congregation, as well as the Hôtels-Dieu of Quebec and Montreal and the Hôpital-General of Quebec encountered serious difficulties in financing, recruitment, or both. These four groups included about two-thirds of the nuns in the colony.² In addition, the general deterioration of the Church during this period due to its insecure position and the declining numbers and quality of clergy presumably affected female churchgoers as well as male ones. In short, the impact of the Conquest is highly debatable. Until seeing more evidence that it was without relevance for women, I see no reason to abandon the generally understood periodisation.

If one does accept the era of French rule, from the early 1600's to 1749 as a meaningful unit, Professor Dumont's dismissal of the seventeenth century as "exceptional" is equally unjustified. In terms of chronology alone, most of the period of French rule transpired during the seventeenth century. One might as well characterise the mere half-century of French control in the eighteenth century as the "exceptional" time. Granted, the eighteenth century differed from the seventeenth, for example in its greater population, more stable conditions and changing moral climate. On the other hand the three economic bases, the fur trade, agriculture and war - with some fluctuations in their relative importance - remained in place. Professor Dumont's insistence that the two centuries must be treated separately is not easy to understand, for she herself discussed them as a unit in a fairly recent article about religious women.³ There is, indeed, much to be said for taking the longer view. It is quite plausible that traditions established in the first century, when women played an important leadership role and were a scarce resource, would endure. In the paper I tried to show tangible ways - most notably in the superior female education and the

participation in commerce - in which the early accomplishments and liberties persisted in the eighteenth century.

I have followed standard usage of scholars such as Trudel and Eccles (who are following seventeenth century French government usage) in treating Acadia as part of New France. While their economy and social structure were simpler, many Acadians shared common origins with the Canadians in the provinces of the Centre-Ouest of France. Until 1713, the same laws applied to both groups. The Acadians also shared with their Canadian cousins a common religion, mutual farming and trading interests, and the scourge of frequent warfare. As I tried to show, women assumed some of the same commercial roles in both societies. Here, as with the question of periodisation, categorical statements claiming some single acceptable framework seem inappropriate.

Another criticism is that important evidence has been neglected and suspect sources used. There may be evidence, particularly in untapped archival sources, that women were harshly treated in New France. In my survey of published materials I found little such evidence. Professor Dumont cites André Lachance's recent article on women and crime in Canada in the early eighteenth century and Louise Dechêne's *Habitants et Marchands de Montréal au XVIIe Siècle*, but neither seems to me to present convincing evidence that counters that thesis of the article.

Lachance does say that magistrates required more evidence for conviction of men than of women and that they were "especially severe when women violated values that traditional society considered fundamentally sacred - that is, private property and the family." (Lachance, p. 168). However, he adds that "otherwise they were generally lenient." He states that few women were prosecuted for crimes against morality (p. 166). He specifically supports the notion, as did my article, that a shortage of woman-power led to

privileged legal treatment. He cites the failure to prosecute servants for domestic theft (p. 164). Lachance notes "a wide discrepancy (especially in the fields of domestic theft and morality) between recorded crime and the actual number of offenses committed." (p. 169). Does this not suggest that women escaped the full force of the law? To be fair, Lachance offers a variety of evidence which could be used to support the idea of harshness or that of leniency.

As Professor Dumont notes, I used Louise Dechêne's *Habitants et Marchands de Montréal au XVIIe Siècle* rather sparingly. *Habitants et Marchands* is a fascinating, provocative work which challenges many longstanding views of New France. By applying the methods of the *Annales* historians to New France, Dechêne produced the most thorough reconstruction of habitant life we have yet seen. The book's greatest strength is probably its exposition of the traditional nature of habitant society. It provides a valuable corrective to the earlier overemphasis on frontier influences. With this part of Dechêne's presentation, the article explicitly agreed (p. 90 and footnote 99).

Serious doubts have been expressed about other aspects of *Habitants et Marchands de Montréal*. Several of the points Professor Dumont faults me for not accepting - the idea that few fur traders went west and some of the demographic material - are precisely those which scholars have questioned. There is a general question about whether the notarial and parish records used so successfully by *Annales* historians to study static rural population in France are really suitable to the extremely unstable immigrant society of early Montreal. More specifically, Fernand Ouellet has questioned the book's use of *inventaires après décès* and other notarial records to reconstruct habitant life; his own calculations have shown them to be seriously under-representative.⁴ The demographer Hubert Charbonneau argues that family reconstitution, which Dechêne did not attempt, shows lower

death rates than she found. One factor serving to lower the rates is the distinction between rural and urban mortality, which Dechêne did not make. Charbonneau also questions the reliability of census data as a source for marriage patterns and fecundity. He argues persuasively, I think, that Dechêne, who did not account for migration from the adjacent countryside into Montreal, underestimated the numbers of *coureurs de bois* drawn from this source. In these environs of the town the low ratio of men to women in the age 25-29 group suggests the departure of many of these men for the west.⁵ Other scholars, too, question the reliability of notarial records as a way of counting *coureurs de bois*. Professor Trudel arrived at the conclusion that notarial records greatly under-represented the fur traders since engagements were often made under the table to avoid paying the notary's fees and the government's levies.⁶ Professor Eccles, after spending some months attempting to reconstruct the pattern of departures for the west, reached a similar conclusion since he found men mentioned on the *congé* lists and in other documents for whom no contracts existed. Given the chronic difficulties of regulating the fur trade, the recurrent complaints of the intendants about its drain on colonial manpower, and the extensive illegal fur trade - which may at times have exceeded half of the total⁷ - it is virtually certain that the activities of many participants went unrecorded. Because of these doubts about some of Dechêne's findings, I relied chiefly on other sources. Most of the demographic information was based on the study of Charbonneau and his colleagues (which generally concurs with Henripin's earlier findings) rather than on Dechêne's material. I have also accepted the view - one which is well supported by primary sources as well as secondary ones - that fur trading was extensive and had a significant social impact on the colony. Much of that impact lay in the opportunities it created for women.

Finally, the dismissal by Professor Dumont of so many of the sources used for "Les Femmes Favorisées" is cavalier. Travellers' accounts, particularly those of seasoned observers such as Franquet and Charlevoix, are one of the most precious sources we have. Although they may have lacked historical perspective, they had the undeniable advantage of having been there. There are some discrepancies in their accounts; on other subjects, such as the educational advantages of women in French Canada, most of them seem to agree. Nor should such rich secondary sources as the works of Fagniez, Boyer and R.L. Seguin be rejected. Professor Dumont has herself relied on information supplied by Seguin.⁸ There is no harm in that; some of these older sources contain a greater treasure of well-documented information on women than do many more recent studies, which are often very localised monographs or works of heavy theorising and thin detail. That one disagrees with the interpretation, or lack of it, does not render sources null and void. It goes without saying that these sources must be used with due consideration for the author's biases or limitations - as all sources must be.

At any rate, Professor Dumont and I seem to be agreed that in the seventeenth century women in New France did enjoy a favourable set of circumstances. She writes that

malgré tout, la conjoncture culturelle observée en Nouvelle-France, milieu colonial ou toutes les énergies doivent être mobilisées, cadre exclusivement catholique particulièrement influencé par les milieux dynamiques de la Contre-Réforme et du mysticisme français, pays d'émigration où se retrouve une population possiblement plus déterminée et plus autonome, permet de conclure à une situation plus positive pour les femmes.

She adds, however, that this situation, "s'atténue et même disparaît avec l'entrée dans le 18e

siècle." This is possible; her article proposes several good reasons why it might be so. However, my researches - admittedly confined to published material - uncovered little evidence to suggest a major decline in women's status in the eighteenth century. A task, perhaps, for Professor Dumont's pen?

One hopes not to throw down a glove, but rather to extend a hand. There is surely room for many approaches to the study of women. The attempt to establish an orthodoxy (beyond the accepted rules of evidence) is counterproductive here, as in other areas of intellectual enquiry. There is no single correct approach; there is room for the detailed monograph and the broad synthesis, for the paper which presents a thesis and that which does not, for those who feel elites are important and those who view them as an irrelevant minority. There are some valid arguments for the somewhat secessionist view of women's history that Professor Dumont espouses. She calls for a new periodisation tailored to women and indeed, a whole new analytical framework. Such a history would be welcome. My aim in writing "Les Femmes Favorisées" was more limited. I hoped to synthesise the published material relating to women in New France; I tried to explain the wide range of women's activity one finds in that material in terms of what we already know about New France.

It is true that the article seeks to present evidence in support of my thesis. The thesis was established in good faith. Years ago, when I first began reading about New France, I was struck by the singular importance of religious women among the colony's founders; further study convinced me that women's educational privileges and their role in commerce were also exceptional; political and legal evidence, though less plentiful, also appeared to support the idea of a privileged position. Besides being supported by a great deal of evidence, the theory makes sense, to me, in terms of what we know of the demographic, economic and cultural conditions of the

colony, and of western society at that time. That the article is neither the last word on the subject, nor the only possible interpretation of it, I fully agree.

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NOTES

1. Footnote 83 should read "française" not "canadienne."
2. M. Trudel, *L'Eglise canadienne sous le régime militaire 1759-1764*, Quebec, 1957, t.II. For the figures cf. p. 347; for chapters on each of these four orders cf. pp. 255-351; for his summary, pp. 411-419.
3. Features of female religious life seem to be presented as common to both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in M. Dumont-Johnson, "Les Communautés Religieuses et la Condition Feminine," *Recherches Sociographiques* Jan-avril 1978. The two centuries are discussed in tandem on pp. 82, 84, 85 and 86.
4. F. Ouellet, "Compte rendu" of *Habitants et Marchands de Montréal*, *Histoire Sociale* Nov. 1975.
5. H. Charbonneau, "Reflexions en marge d'*Habitants et Marchands de Montréal* de Louise Dechêne," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amerique française* (30,2) sept. 1976.
6. M. Trudel, "Compte rendu" of H. Charbonneau's *Vie et Mort de nos ancêtres*, *Histoire Sociale* May 1977. Another reason for neglecting to record trips west was to avoid the evidence of lawbreaking in years when no congés were granted.
7. J. Lunn, "The Illegal Fur Trade out of New France" *CHAR* 1939, p. 65.
8. F. Dumont-Johnson, "Les Communautés Religieuses..." p. 85.