Women in the Canadian Mosaic

Edited by Gwen Matheson. Toronto: Peter Martin, 1976. Pp. 353.

This collection of essays, like many other publications about women during International Women's Year, smacks of the opportunism of government bureaucracies who finance such works in the hope of satisfying with a few crumbs what really calls for a much larger and more radical solution. Women in the Canadian Mosaic, if it can be said to advocate anything, suggests that the imposition of the feminine values of nurturing and preserving life in human society will result in a radically different society. Invoking the ghost of Nellie McClung, editor Matheson and some of the contributors accept the solution of the conservative wing of the suffrage movement for the problems not only of women but of the entire society. This "feminization" of society is based on a shaky analysis of women as a "class", a category that is merely asserted, never discussed.

Readers expecting a feminist version of John Porter's Vertical Mosaic will not find a close study of woman's position among class and status groups but rather a hodge-podge of articles, four of them historical and eleven of a more contemporary and personal nature. The "mosaic" of the title refers merely to the varieties of women's experiences in Canada. The fifteen essays are accompanied by an appendix of women's centres and newspapers and a very brief bibliography.

Of the four historical articles, three are simple narratives and only one takes any kind of critical stance. By far the best Gorham's piece on the Canadian suffragists examines differences between the British, Canadian and, to a lesser extent, the American movements. She challenges the conventional notion of maternal feminism as an explanatory device while exploring the relationship between the frontier and feminism. Ironically, her article sharply undercuts the very ground upon which the editor stands. Other historical articles include: Lang and Matheson's useful, but rather superficial, biographical sketch of McClung; Pestieau's narrative of the development of the Quebec suffrage movement, and Macpherson and Sears' account of the history of the Voice of Women. The last piece reveals the very important role of lobbying groups on the international level, albeit within the same framework of women as the conscience of humanity.

The contemporary articles on the whole are vastly more disturbing. Barely a nod is given to working class women and their struggles. The only articles which touch on the working class experience even peripherally deal with immigrants, unions and farm wives. Alberro and Montero outline the different immigration experiences of peasant, rural Ecuadorian women as compared to urban, professional Uruguayan women when they reach Canada. Grace Hartman of the Canadian Union of Public Employees speaks

for women in the trade union movement. She draws attention to the small number of unionized women (only 23.5% of working women) and stresses the need to educate male union members. Hartman suggests that the normal channels of promotion within the unions may have to be ignored temporarily so that women can catch up. The plight of the farm wife is vividly described by Norma Taylor of the National Farmers Union; she demonstrates exactly how the law and policies of the government and its agencies keep the farm wife in a dependent economic position.

Three articles deal with formal education. Fiona Nelson purports to discuss sex-stereotyping in the schools but much of the article actually presents a confused autobiographical defence of the "exceptional woman." If one could only change attitudes, she argues, women could be promoted to higher positions in the schools. Frances Wilson also harps on the need to change attitudes through the development of women's studies courses. From her experience as a community college teacher, Wilson laments that women's studies has become an isolated content area rather than a new methodological approach. What she fails to point out is the need, in these times of tight funding, for the integration of women's studies within the established disciplines. As the "extras" in course curriculums are cut, women's studies risks a premature death. Wilson warns against political propagandizing through women's studies and advocates a fence-sitting position to avoid the pitfalls of "male political analysis." On the contrary, I would suggest that such programs are intrinsically political. They also become political footballs, that is, they provide administrations with "proof" that something is being done for women. As Jill Vickers points out in her clear analysis of the position of women within academia, the advancement of women depends on political action. As vice-president of the Canadian Association of University Teachers, Vickers understands that attitudes will not change until actual conditions do. Her tentative suggestion of affirmative action programs should be examined with great caution however. As Laurel Ritchie points out in a critique in This Magazine (Vol. 10, no. 1, Feb.-Mar. 1976, pp. 25-27), affirmative action was not defined by the women's movement. "Its historical definition was molded by corporations and governments. And that definition is a dangerously narrow one." The danger in affirmative action lies in its very limited assistance to small sectors of women in elite positions.

Political action and power are the subject of Rosemary Brown's speech reprinted here. Brown suggests that women have very different understandings of politics and power. The implication of this speech is not far from the editor's essay on McClung: namely that women will somehow purify and improve the public sphere. Brown chastises the suffragists for failing to see the long term battle to be waged but she herself replicates another

of their errors: that of seeing women as politically purer creatures.
The two women artists in the Canadian Mosaic have radically different assessments of the role of feminism in art. While Atwood steers clear of political involvement as detrimental to art, Kantaroff views feminism as a tool for liberating women artists. Both positions are problematic. While Atwood pinpoints some of the problems of feminist art, her overall attitude denies that art is shaped by and, in turn, shapes culture. Kantaroff, on the other hand, presents a rather confused analysis of culture. She first postulates that all culture is male-dominated but then advocates the rediscovery of a female culture which cannot exist within her framework. In addition to this contradictory stance she ventures beyond her competency with inaccurate historical allusions and an all-too-easy dismissal of Freud.

Lynne Teather's concluding article, titled "The Feminist Mosaic," recounts the history of the women's movement of the 1960's and 1970's. Teather's perfunctory and unconvincing bow to Canadian nationalism leads her to postulate a vague "woman's tradition" stemming from Moodie and Parr Traill. Canada's regionalism has contributed to a decentralized movement, but as Teather herself later admits, the basis of the fragmentation of the movement also lies in important political differences which divide the various factions. The New Left in the U.S., Canada and Quebec playe a crucial role in the responses of all facets of the woman's movement and should not be underestimated. Teather is also somewhat reluctant to credit the U.S. women's movement with a significant role in catalyzing Canadian women to action. What emerges from this last article, and from the tone of the book generally, is a pluralist vision of the women's movement which leaves far too many unexplored areas and unanswered questions. Why did the movement fail so abysmally to attract working class support? Why has so little theoretical work been done? How does class affect the possibility of a unified women's movement? Can the splintering of the movement be mended and how? It is certainly not enough to appeal to the example of our "fore-mothers."
Ultimately I feel that collections such as this one do little to help us out of our current dilemma. Perhaps they even complicate our problems by allowing us to pretend that significant progress is being made. What is needed now is more serious examination of women within the Canadian social structure, past and present. The "attitudes" that prevent women from participating fully in Canadian society are based on class and sex realities that we are only beginning to understand and for which this book is of little, if any, use.

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