

# Comments and Replies

**Gwen Matheson** A COMMENT ON LINDA KEALEY'S REVIEW OF WOMEN IN THE CANADIAN MOSAIC

Linda Kealey would be well advised to do a little research into the origins of the books she attempts to review before making false assumptions about them. Such an assumption, in this case not only unfounded but little short of libellous, appears at the beginning of her comments on Women in the Canadian Mosaic and casts serious doubts on the validity of her whole review. It reads as follows:

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.

The only "opportunism" in this case is that of the reviewer who uses her review as a hook on which to hang her own particular dissatisfactions with the "system." The fact is that Women in the Canadian Mosaic was begun long before International Women's Year and its publication in 1976 (after IWY by the way) was purely coincidental. During the four years in which the contributors and I worked on this book we received absolutely no financial assistance in any form and had no hope of any. It was only when the book was practically completed and a publisher at last found

that we finally did obtain a certain amount of desperately needed financial aid. The whole motivation of Women in the Canadian Mosaic, therefore, grew out of our own deep gut feelings as a result of the experience of being women in a male supremacist and economically unfair society.

With regard to the rest of Kealey's piece, my general feeling as I read it was similar to that of Nellie McClung when she once made an observation on E. Cora Hind, who was an ardent and unquestioning supporter of Canada's involvement in the second World War: "Miss Hind saw only one side of the question," writes Nellie, "and there were times when I envied her, though I resented her denunciations of those who thought otherwise." (The Stream Runs Fast, p. 139) Although Kealey's and Hind's general philosophies are no doubt quite different, they share what has been referred to as a "nothing but" approach. This blinkered and one-dimensional view tends to account for almost every social problem according to some neat formula--for example, nothing but class oppression, nothing but the patriarchy, nothing but "Original Sin" or whatever.

Those women who see practically everything in terms of "class," as Kealey seems to do, fall prey to a particular form of stereotyping in their approach to the subject of "working class" women. Rather than acknowledging the fact that almost every woman in our present society is a "working woman" in one way or an-

other, they visualize the term as applying to a crude propaganda-poster image of a woman in kerchief and overalls stationed in front of a ruthless factory machine. (Needless to say, most of these class-obsessed feminists have themselves never worked for any long period of time at that particular level.) Then they proceed to exalt this romanticized figure to the level of a cult object, having little sympathy for those of their sisters who do not fit the stereotype.

The fact is that all the articles in Women in the Canadian Mosaic deal with working women--women of the past working to get the vote and improve their whole status, women of the present working to prevent war, women working to raise consciousness in the educational systems and religious establishments, women working in the political field, women working to create art and literature--all of them facing tremendous obstacles. Also, every one of the contributors to the book is a working woman (some of them even in Kealey's categorization), to the point where it was almost a miracle that they could produce deeply thought out and well researched articles at the same time.

Those women, however, who are "working" according to Kealey's definition of the term do deserve special support and consideration. In Women in the Canadian Mosaic they get it in the form of three articles specifically dealing with women and unions, immigrant women, and women on farms (a much neglected sub-

ject), the contents of which the reviewer outlines with a rather grudging approval. Surely this constitutes more than what she calls "Barely a nod."

The other way in which Kealey's one-dimensional approach chiefly expresses itself is her dogmatic rejection of any concept of feminism that differs from her own. In this case it is a certain aspect of the feminist thought of Nellie McClung, whose very lively "ghost" is indeed a central inspiration of Women in the Canadian Mosaic, an aspect referred to by Kealey as "maternal" feminism. The reviewer defines it rather well when she says it advocates "that the imposition of the feminine values of nurturing and preserving life in human society will result in a radically different society." In other words, besides the general human contribution which women are gradually being freed to make to society, they might also, as the result of conditioning or biology or both, be able to make a unique contribution. (In the same way men might have their special contribution to make also.) I am fully aware, of course, that such a view is currently not fashionable among those who wish to reduce the nature of woman and man to a dreary identity and who assert that, aside from a few minor anatomical features, all the apparent differences between them are one hundred percent the result of "conditioning." These environmentalist and reductionist philosophies are derived from certain contemporary schools of thought, such as Behaviourist psy-

chology. Reversing Freud's dogmatic dictum that "Anatomy is destiny," they go to the other false extreme in asserting that "Conditioning is destiny." The conviction that woman's special life-preserving function, when linked with the right philosophy, could do much to transform the world helped give many of the brave women of the past the ability to face such tortures as force-feeding and thirst strikes and even the loss of their lives. They were justifiably concerned with their own "equal rights" but they also had a wider vision. Recent researches in the fields of biology and zoology corroborate this vision by giving support to the theory of natural differences between the sexes and the whole field of ecology is extending the "nurturing" concept to an even wider field. The philosophy of so-called "maternal" feminism is not so much "out-of-date" as still too advanced for many contemporary feminists to grasp, and its full spiritual significance will be appreciated only in the future. The recognition of what might be called neo-McClungian feminism is one of the features of Women in the Canadian Mosaic that make it a book still somewhat ahead of its time.

In connection with this theme, Kealey's claim that Deborah Gorham's article, "The Canadian Suffragists," "sharply undercuts the very ground upon which the editor stands" is not only completely unfounded but it could be retorted that the opposite is the case. Gorham, whose opinions I respect and the writing of whose article I supervised over a two or

three year period, does make a distinction between "equal rights" feminism and "maternal" feminism, but she nowhere states that the two were considered mutually incompatible except perhaps among a few women. (See pp. 25-26 and 48-53 in Gorham's article in Women in the Canadian Mosaic.) Nellie McClung, in fact, was an outstanding example of a woman who believed equally in both the "equal rights" and "maternal" theories, using the one to support the other, and she deplored the "martyr" and "pedestal" roles foisted upon women and sometimes falsely equated with "maternal" feminism. It is probably significant that the reference Gorham cites in support of the argument that most feminists perhaps used the "maternal" approach for "tactical" reasons only is an American one. (A. Kraditor's Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, New York, 1965).

"The maternal feminism exemplified by McClung was a powerful force in Canada," writes Gorham. And Kealey's apparent failure to recognize this fact is a third example of the short-sighted quality of her review. This is revealed in her attack on the concluding article in the book, Lynne Teather's highly comprehensive and much needed account of the Canadian women's movement of the 1960's and 1970's. She seems irritated with Teather for proving, with considerable documentation, that the contemporary Canadian women's movement has its own unique tradition and is not merely an off-shoot of New Left activities and the U.S.A. women's movement,

even though these did play a partial role in its formation.

The establishment of a Canadian feminist identity is one of the several main themes that give the collection its unity and so exonerate it from Kealey's unfounded accusation of being merely a "hodge-podge." (Other unifying factors are the historical continuity running from the first article through to the last and also the "maternal" feminism theme which appears throughout, but which Kealey cannot accept.) At the same time, in the selection of contributors and topics for articles, I tried to present the spectrum of feminist thought in this country, including radical, moderate and conservative and with a wide range of orientations, from Marxist to Catholic.

I realized that in trying to give the book this comprehensive, or what Kealey refers to as "pluralist," approach I was going to make it vulnerable to the attacks of the one-dimensionalists and black-and-whiters, both well-meaning and hostile. What has been called the "multiple point of view" is, in my opinion, the most realistic one for the twentieth century. At the same time it has its own particular dangers and even defects, which are avoided by the narrower and safer one-pointed approach. However, these are the defects and irregularities of a living, evolving organism and as such are preferable to what is often the fossilized consistency of the highly specialized approach.

Women in the Canadian Mosaic may be viewed as an explorer's guide-book rather than a neatly defined collection of recipes for the solution of all women's problems. Whether we like it or not, it is an accurate reflection of the women's movement in an unstable and evolving country in a transitional period of history. This was recognized in what is probably the best of a large number of generally positive reviews, Naomi Black's in the Globe and Mail (Feb. 28, 1976) in which Women in the Canadian Mosaic was described as a "very Canadian book." Kealey's complaints about this book are really complaints about the present state of the women's movement in Canada. And I feel that she gives it the highest compliment of any it has received when she says that it poses a great many "unanswered questions." It is my hope that she and others will be inspired enough by their reading of this book to produce books of their own in which there are attempts to answer some of these questions.

Like Nellie McClung, I cannot help envying the Hinds (and the Kealeys) of this world who feel they have all the answers. I once went through that stage too in an earlier part of my life but I have now become a middle-aged searcher who realizes that there are other dimensions to human existence than the political and even the feminist, no matter how important these latter might be. The whole situation was summed up for me recently by the comments of a woman I used to work with when I was going through a

phase of one-dimensional "radical feminism." She was a doctrinaire leftist at the time (and probably still is). After warmly praising Women in the Canadian Mosaic, this young woman referred back to the period of our acquaintance around 1970. "Those were the good old days!" she exclaimed with an air of nostalgia. And then she added rather wistfully, "But things have never been so simple since."

**Linda Kealey** A REPLY TO GWEN MATHESON

It is unfortunate that Gwen Matheson (whom I have not met) takes my critical review of Women in the Canadian Mosaic as a personal attack. Her reply is indicative of the low level of critical thinking in feminist circles (academic and non-academic). My review addressed the problems in the analysis and organization of the collection, not her personal motives. The lead sentence of the review, to which she objects, does not question her motives but rather those of the present government. My point is that not every feminist publication deserves a pat on the back and a chorus of "well-done."

The review takes issue with a number of critical areas:

1. The simple identification with, and distortion of, Nellie McClung and the brand of feminism she represented, namely, maternal feminism. The book lacks a critical discussion of the

phenomenon of maternal feminism (except in Deborah Gorham's piece) and does not delineate the class roots of this type of feminism. Clearly maternal feminism was dominant in Canada and the U.S. in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. That is not the issue. The issue, in historical terms, is why did such a large number of feminists adopt this model in this period? How did these women come to adopt a philosophy with strong evangelical and missionary overtones, and with all the negative aspects of fear of the foreigner, race-suicide, etc., rather than a philosophy based on equal rights. Why did they shy away from class struggle and opt for "Christian stewardship?" The idea of the woman as redeemer of capitalism fell flat on its face in the period after World War I. Ballots in the hands of women did not challenge the basic inequities. McClung and other feminists failed to see problems of working women, of women without children and thus provided no "model" for them. Maternal feminism, despite Matheson's inadequate defense, provides very little in the way of a rationale for modern feminists precisely because it is based on late nineteenth century ideas of sex differences. The male is aggressive and active; the female, passive and nurturant. It is certainly significant that the discoveries of endocrinology in the early twentieth century undermined the idea of a special social role for women while failing to challenge the idea that biology is destiny. Various scientific