

“Feminist Biography” Reconsidered

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Perhaps because she seems to be groping for the “correct line” for a feminist historian writing biography, Susan Mann Trofimenkoff’s “Feminist Biography” (*Atlantis*, Spring 1985) troubled me. I do not agree that there are what Trofimenkoff calls “three stumbling blocks” in the path of feminist historians who “ponder biography” (p. 1).

The first of the three, wariness regarding appropriateness of biography for study of women’s history because “by definition biography appears to select exceptional people, individuals who have stood out ...” (pp. 1-2) can be dismissed rather quickly. Important people are not always the “Greats” Trofimenkoff mentions. When I think of books about individual lives which have taught me about Canadian history, what comes to mind immediately is Rolf Knight’s *A Very Ordinary Life* and Knight and Maya Koizumi’s *A Man of Our Times*, neither of which has anything to do with “Greats”.¹ With a vivid recollection from an English working-class woman about a period during and immediately after World War I, Sheila Rowbotham shows us how ordinary women’s lives can tell us so much more than can any general statement about changes in household technology.² She reminds us that important sources for history include “the personal testimony of any woman who can remember — not just women who have witnessed major political events ...”³.

What is called the second barrier, an abundance of bad models, can be avoided by learning from good ones. There are fine historical biographies to inspire and assist one; two of which I admire very much are Cathy Porter’s splendid *Alexandra Kollontai, A Biography* in Russian history and, in my own field, the history of Japan, Murata Shizuko’s classic, *Fukuda Hideko*⁴.

The third, “risk of distorting the past by looking at it through feminist eyes” (p. 3), is a serious sort of concern — but not just for feminist scholars. Historians of all points of view bring the values of their own time and space to the data they examine. Like other time travellers, feminists carry cultural baggage with them on their journeys to former times and thus must guard against manufacturing a past to fit the present.⁵ On the other hand, feminist discomfort with the present has contributed much to creation of critical perspectives outside of the cultural “mainstream” with which to question, correct, expand “the past” which male-centred historical scholarship offers as rationalization of the present.⁶

Although expectations of the present must not become standards of judgment in a biography about an individual in an earlier period, feminist historians might like to acknowledge the enormous debt we all owe to the contemporary questions which have helped shape our scholarly approaches.⁷

In addition to the three phantom “stumbling blocks”, a difficulty I have with “Feminist Biography” is its author’s reluctance to put forward clearly her own definition of feminism, although interpretation of this concept is central to the article. Of course there is such a rich diversity of feminist analyses that definition is by no means an easy task. As Janet Radcliffe Richard notes, the word ‘feminism’ “seems to have no precise and generally recognized meaning, but it has picked up a good many connotations of late, and an unexplained statement of support for feminism may therefore be easily misunderstood ...”⁸. Yet because this is true, there is all the more need for Trofimenkoff to provide her own definition. I suspect from the content of “Feminist Biography” that its author might accept Richard’s definition as a point of departure: “... there are excellent reasons for thinking that *women suffer from systematic injustice because of their sex ...* I shall be taking that proposition as constituting the essence of feminism, and counting anyone who accepts it as a feminist.”⁹ “Feminist Biography” eventually does supply a definition for feminist history: “The purpose [of feminist scholarship] may be as simple as uncovering a past that has been denied women ... or it may be as complex as exposing the patterns of patriarchal society in order to change them.” (pp. 3-4).

This two-part definition of feminist history¹⁰ is somewhat obscured by the suggestion that scholarship which serves a purpose is somewhat “scary” — at least “to traditional intellectuals” (pp. 3-4). What is scary about engaged scholarship? Certainly committed scholarship has long had historians among its most enthusiastic and respected practitioners. Even the purposefulness of those who put engagement ahead of scholarship is far from scary, as the reception of history written by that master of polemics, Leon Trotsky, suggests:

From the *Times Literary Supplement* to the *Sunday Telegraph*, from Kingsley Martin to Isaac Deutscher, the authorities

represented in the presentation of the three volume English edition of *The History of the Russian Revolution* all agree that Trotsky’s historical work has no parallel save perhaps Churchill’s. Scholarly opinion broadly concurs.¹¹

Definitely a part of feminist history, feminist biography warrants no tentative, half-apologetic approach. No correct line is needed. For tactical reasons one may choose certain kinds of subjects rather than others — after all, certain kinds of subjects have been hitherto woefully neglected. As Rowbothan puts it so well: “A primary focusing on women is tactically necessary in order to disentangle ourselves from this all-pervading identification of the norm with the specific predicament of men.”¹² One should never underestimate the importance of tactics, but in principle a biographical study of any individual has the potential to be fine feminist history. As a specific contextual web of interconnected ethnicity, class, gender, sexual preference and other threads, the life of any individual is part of the whole story which, above all, feminist historians are committed to telling. Telling part of the whole story is, one hopes, what Susan Mann Trofimenkoff wants to do with her biography of Thérèse Casgrain.

NOTES

1. Rolf Knight, *A Very Ordinary Life* (Vancouver, 1974); Rolf Knight and Maya Koizumi, *A Man of Our Times: the Life-History of a Japanese Canadian Fisherman* (Vancouver, 1974).
2. Sheila Rowbothan, “Search and Subject, Threading Circumstance” *Dreams and Dilemmas, Collected Writings* (London, 1983), p. 186.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
4. Cathy Porter, *Alexandra Kollontai, A Biography* (London, 1980); Murata Shizuko, *Fukuda Hideko, Fujin Kaiho Undo no Senkusha* [Fukuda Hideko, Pioneer of the Women’s Liberation Movement] (Tokyo, 1959).
5. See Joan Hoff-Wilson, “Righting Patriarchal History,” *The Women’s Review of Books* (November, 1985), pp. 17-19, for a critical discussion of this problem in the context of the history of U.S. women.
6. Thanks go to Mary O’Brien and *The Politics of Reproduction* (Boston, 1983) for that very apt term “malestream.” In Japanese history such critical perspectives are producing fruitful results. For a rich expansion of the malestream past see Sharon Sievers, *Flowers in Salt, Origins of Feminist Consciousness in*

Japan (Stanford, 1983). For one correction of it see my "The Male Present Versus the Female Past: Historians and Japan's Ancient Female Emperors," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* (Oct.-Dec., 1982), pp. 71-75.

7. Because I work in Japanese women's history, I am deeply indebted to the contemporary issues in Japan which have focused attention — scholarly and otherwise — upon Takamure Itsue (1894-1964), a woman whose life and thought are a thorough denial of stereotypes of Japanese womanhood. The negation in Takamure's personal life of established expectations for women, the strong strain of autonomy in her three successive careers as poet, anarchist polemicist, ethno-historian and above all her consistent advocacy of a woman-centred sexual equality within the cultural context of her own country's past, are all extremely attractive to those who today in Japan seek to resist the tremendous power of patriarchy. Takamure Itsue has become a heroine of Japan's post-1960s women's movement; she has also been recognized at long last in the scholarly world as the important historian of Japanese marriage, family, and women that she is. I am grateful for the contemporary concerns which have led me to study the life and work of this individual. The first results of my engagement with the life of Takamure Itsue are published as "Feminism and Anarchism in Japan: Takamure Itsue, 1894-1964," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* (Apr.-June, 1985), pp.2-19.
8. Janet Radcliffe Richards, *The Sceptical Feminist, A Philosophical Inquiry* (Harmondsworth, 1980), p. 11. I am indebted to Christine St. Peter for reminding me of the diversity of interpretations given to feminism.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.
10. In "Search and Subject, Threading Circumstance," Sheila Rowbotham discusses problems of feminist history in terms which resemble this two-part definition. Although Rowbotham's essay was first published in 1974, the issues it deals with are still with us. Other disciplines seem to be coming up with similar definitions. See for example, Shirley Dex, *The Sexual Division of Work* (Brighton, 1985), esp. "What is Feminist Methodology," pp. 11-17.
11. Peter Beilharz, "Trotzky as Historian," *History Workshop* (Autumn, 1985), p. 36.
12. Sheila Rowbotham, "Search and Subject, Threading Circumstance," p. 178.