

# The Making of a Feminist Biography: Reflections on a Miniature Passion

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## ABSTRACT

Taking a recent *Atlantis* article on "Feminist Biography" as their starting point, the authors examine the theoretical issues raised in light of their work on Charlotte Whitton. In particular, they discuss the nature and purpose of feminist biography, the question of the biographer's intention to do feminist biography, the utility of the life course as an organizing principle in writing a biography, and the problematic relationship between "private" and "public" spheres.

## RÉSUMÉ

Utilisant un article paru récemment dans la revue *Atlantis* sur la biographie féministe comme point de départ, ces auteurs examinent les questions théoriques posées à partir de leurs recherches sur Charlotte Whitton. En particulier, ils discutent la nature et l'objet de la biographie féministe, la question de l'intention de l'auteure d'écrire la biographie féministe, l'utilité du genre de vie comme principe organisateur en écrivant une biographie, et le rapport problématique entre les sphères "privées" et "publiques."

All I want, I boldly said to keep you from dying."  
(Joyce Carol Oates, *A Miniature Passion*).

Susan Mann Trofimenkoff's timely discussion, "Feminist Biography" (*Atlantis* 10, no. 2 [Spring 1985]), prompted us to reflect on our own experiences in writing a biography of Charlotte Whitton, feminist, social reformer and politician.<sup>1</sup> The following essay is not a critique of Trofimenkoff's piece. Rather it presents a complementary view to demonstrate the reconciliation of the tensions between theory and practice in thinking and writing about historical actors.

We hope that in the discussion of our experiences, we will reflect the dynamic, even intimate, relationship that inevitably develops between the historical actor and her biographers. Before such a relationship could develop, however, we were compelled to address several theoretical questions during the research and writing stages. Only after their resolution could we comfortably and consciously set out to write a "feminist" biography as distinct from a biography of a woman, even if that woman was a feminist. Indeed, Trofimenkoff raises several of these questions and enabled us to use them as signposts to guide our reflections: (1) the nature of feminist biography and

the question of "political" commitment; (2) the relationship between the private sphere and the public events implicit in the "life cycle" approach; and (3) the choice of subject and the problem of "women worthies."

## The Nature of Feminist Biography

Unlike Trofimenkoff, we do not see the *major assumptions* that a feminist biography is guided by the sex of the subject making the difference, and the constraints imposed by the fact of that sex. These are necessary but not sufficient criteria. Indeed, by over-emphasizing the second criteria, biographers may unwittingly subsume female actors under male hegemony in the role of victims.<sup>2</sup> A biography of a woman, as distinct from a feminist biography, can assume these two criteria equally, and often do. For example, sympathetic biographies have been written on Queen Elizabeth I, St. Teresa of Avila, Radclyffe Hall, and Florence Nightingale, whose lives were obviously constrained by their sex; however, even if their biographers are female, the final result might not be "feminist" in any sense of the word.

Surely the essential criterion must be one of *intention*, that is, biographers who see themselves as feminist inter-

preters of women's pasts set out to *raise consciousness* in their readers, particularly women readers. Admittedly, this intentionally can promote problems, which include imposing an ideological framework on the circumstances of the subject's life, thus distorting or unjustly skewing the material through selective use of data and creating a narrative that is heavy-handed and didactic.

Nonetheless, it is foolhardy to claim that feminist biography is not ideological inasmuch as the biographers are *interested* observers of the female condition. In this case the personal is indeed political. Feminists do not pretend otherwise, as illustrated by Elaine Showalter's comment "that feminist criticism is more coherent as ideology than methodology." Cary Nelson, in "Envoys of Otherness," agrees "that despite considerable diversity in approaches [feminist study] has an ideological consistency."<sup>3</sup> For her part, Dale Spender, with her customary adroitness, argues that such studies are overtly ideological, are indeed propaganda — an organized schema for the propagation of a doctrine or practice — while admitting that feminism "has no greater monopoly on truth than does patriarchy." She cautions us, however, not to be seduced by the mere exchange or reversal of patriarchal values, which results in an equally faulty and unfair feminist treatment, and which creates frames of reference that emulate the closed system we have rejected.

If all frames of reference including our own are closed systems containing within themselves the means for their own legitimation and for the outlawing of the systems of others, then our minimal commitment should be to understanding frames of reference.<sup>4</sup>

Works that plug evidence into a conceived model are tracts for the times and will be remembered for the distorting effects of presentism, and not for the spotlight of present concerns into the past.

Biographers choose their subjects for a variety of reasons. Some, of course, are professional biographers, and others — ourselves included — arrive at their work by indirection. As historians of childhood, we happened upon Whitton in a study of Canadian child welfare. Thus, our initial interests in her were framed by a larger study. Her part in shaping child welfare during the inter-war years was so remarkable that we wanted to know more about her. The happy coincidence of our interest in Whitton and the availability of her papers led us to the biography.

Some biographers have to "create" a feminist persona for their subject which we did not have to do for Whitton.

There was, for example, no need to label her a "maternal" or a "social" feminist and explain the qualifiers used. In the context of her time Whitton's life and her words spoke for themselves. Curiously, some feminists of the 1980s object to the description of "feminist," yet no woman of Whitton's generation seemed to doubt her feminist commitment. Some claim she could not have been a feminist in light of her views on abortion and family life. Such presentist short-sightedness is, however, less problematic than the ideological prejudices of other critics who reject the possibility of a "feminist" being on "the right" [politically]. We believe Whitton proves this possibility. If political conservatism and practical feminism are antithetical, we are not sure what to do with the numerous women of last century who have been described as feminists of varying kinds. After all, there are too few Rosa Luxemburg's or Emma Goldman's to write about.

It is not impossible that, had we started out with other interests and intentions, we would have interpreted Whitton's life very differently. It was only when we realized that these were inadequately explained without reference to her female networks, the corpus of her feminist thought, or her feminist point of view that was shaped by her single status, that we were able to place her in a patriarchal and heterosexist society, where the female world was overrepresented [in her mind] by the "married."<sup>5</sup> Likewise, we could have constructed a biography around Whitton's psychological state, her subjective and private realities. However, believing that a *feminist* biography must primarily be directed at the public and not the private worlds of its subjects — lest it become non-feminist psychohistory using androcentric paradigms — we concentrated on her careers, her public actions and public worlds, and the gender-system in which she operated. Obviously, this cannot be done without the connections being drawn between the dynamics of the private woman and the public figure.

The biographical subject speaks to us through the record she leaves behind. In Whitton's case the records were as complex and as contradictory as the woman herself. Over half a century of public life meant that many of her ideas unfolded gradually and her views changed, modified, and adapted, according to the changes in society and her particular circumstances. Therefore, her life defied simplistic explanations, feminist or otherwise, and countered popular conceptions about past feminists or any monolithic views of present feminism. Just as biography, no less than history itself, is full of the surprises, richness, and variety of the human condition, so too are our feminist antecedents and role models as complex, as contradic-

tory, as admirable, or as odious as we are ourselves. When our “adventures” with Whitton began, our understanding of her was undefined and it was the data (her voice) that directed the exploration and guided the dialogue. What developed was an intense emotional involvement. We are reminded, at this point in our reflection, of the closing words of Natalie Zemon Davis’s presidential address at the 1987 meeting of the American Historical Association. Davis movingly described the miniature passion of historians for their craft and, we trust, biographers for their subject in the metaphor of history’s two bodies:

My image of History would have at least two bodies in it, at least two persons talking, arguing, always listening to the other as they gestured at their books; and it would be a film, not a still picture, so that you could see that sometimes they wept, sometimes they were astonished, sometimes they were knowing, and sometimes they laughed with delight.<sup>6</sup>

An interesting perception occurred to us earlier in our research, namely no one else, not even her contemporaries, could have known all the aspects of Charlotte Whitton’s life as we did: her years at home, at Queen’s, with the Social Service Council and later the Canadian Welfare Council, at the League of Nations, her relations with colleagues and friends in North America and Europe, and so on. Not only did we have literary remains, but also the observations of friends and critics of that time. From our vantage point, we comprehended her life in its many facets with a knowledge of its elements that only Whitton could have known better. We are not claiming that our perspective is the “Truth” but that our knowledge base is unique for the moment.

Significantly, it was Whitton’s very complexity and ambiguity that made some readers of the original drafts uneasy. Her contradictory and turbulent relations with equally strongwilled women (e.g., Eunice Dyke, public nurse leader) or subordinates (e.g., Marjorie Bradford, her assistant at the Canadian Welfare Council) flew in the face of these readers’ gynocentric and ideological assumptions which see women as cooperative and nurturing. Our work tried to avoid a romantic idealization of womanhood that overlooks or minimizes the variables of political allegiance, language, class, marital status, sexual orientation, race, or heterosocial relationships, which have proven as powerful in dividing women as gender has in uniting them.<sup>7</sup> Neither did her political conservatism and racism fit neatly into preconceived ideas of what a “true” feminist should be.

Nonetheless, Whitton’s ambiguities — about her gender role, her relationships with her own sex, and her acerbic feminist thought — did enable us to interpret her as a representative of a generation of single women who created their own communities to counteract the heterosexist ethos and marital and maternal hegemony that prevailed then as it does today. In short, through Whitton’s voice, we heard other voices — those of single pioneer professional women — and came to appreciate them — if not as a community of “women-identified-women,” then at least as a cohort of “women-without-men” (economically, emotionally, and often socially and professionally).<sup>8</sup>

If the impetus for feminist biography is consciousness-raising, we were able to realize part of that imperative by interpreting our subject in a broad perspective that would touch the realities of contemporary women. It was Whitton, as a recognized and authoritative spokesperson for women of her day, who transformed this biography into a feminist enterprise. If our subject represented a female social group, then she no longer stood alone as a “sport of history.” Consequently, the possibilities for a collective biography of this cohort became apparent. Few women have left behind a data base similar to Whitton’s. Nevertheless, it is possible to reconstruct their histories through a collective biography (a prosopography) in the manner of Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920* (1985), who transcended the problems of paucity of data about individuals that has so effectively silenced women’s voices. We would like to see a prosopography of Whitton’s generation of professional social welfare women that would complement our efforts. One aspect of their professional and private lives requiring examination is the extent to which their professional and reforming power and activities flowed from collective life as friends, and the degree to which this power was attributable to their close affiliation with male reformers and male institutions. Although Kathryn Kish Sklar has carefully analyzed the community of women reformers at Hull House in the 1890s, and that one of the authors has begun a study of female separatism in Canadian child welfare, the whole issue of the balance between female separatism and access to male spheres of influence remains to be studied.<sup>9</sup>

Listening to other women’s voices may result in yet another tension, such as reconciling those relationships the subject has with others who neither became — nor perhaps even wished to become — public figures. To what extent should we use materials of friends or family whose thoughts and lives are usually not seen as public currency?

We were compelled again to place these in a broader social context to avoid sensationalizing or offering such intimacies as easy pickings for the prurient. Given a tendency towards a psychological reductionism in contemporary society, such material must be interpreted as carefully as possible (taking into account the fallibility of the biographer). At the very least, the biographer must be prudent about such materials to avoid misunderstandings.

In our examination of letters and other private materials, we recognized that, although Charlotte Whitton sensed her historical potential, few of her correspondents, if any, had intimations of having public scrutiny thrust upon them. If funding agencies are concerned with obtaining the informed consent of subjects of research (including oral history), we believe that historians and biographers have a similar duty to the dead. Whitton's own sensitivity to the loyalties that one generation owed past and future generations — her "communion of saints" — also reminded us of our responsibilities. We need to respect the integrity of the dead who cannot sue us as much as the living who can. In brief, this means a certain restraint in dealing with the substance of private persons, whose only apparent connection with historical events is a private correspondence with a historical actor. Nevertheless, it was through private, even intimate, correspondence in early years that we were able to elaborate the theme of female friendship and networks in order to sharpen the feminist focus of our study, that is, make direct connections between the private and public spheres. Such correspondence was used to recreate the romantic sensibilities among women of Whitton's generation and to argue for its historical significance.

Moreover, we decided not to attempt interviews. This decision was based on two considerations. The first, and lesser, was the lack of finances. Even if we had been committed to oral history — which we are not — the limits of our research funds would have precluded such an effort. More to the point, however, is our belief that historical method is adequate for reconstructing past experience, individual or collective. With the exception of Kathleen Whitton Ryan, few if any from her youth and early career survived. The most obvious associates are those who knew Whitton during her life as a politician and celebrity. In our own perverse way, we have never accorded that part of Whitton's life the same significance that we freely gave to her first fifty-four years. In brief, we wanted to read our Charlotte Whitton "neat," just as we prefer to read others who left a legacy of letters, documents, and publications without the benefit of living Coles notes.

Other historians and biographers are free to disagree with us, believing that interviews may have forced us to re-examine our assumptions or re-interpret our conclusions. However, rejecting the idea of "Truth" in history or biography and accepting the inevitability of such disagreements and conflicting interpretations, we welcome other readings of Whitton's life.

Finally, unlike Trofimenkoff's Thérèse Casgrain, who left only eleven boxes at the Public Archives of Canada, Whitton's sources included over a hundred and thirty boxes in the Whitton Papers, as well as most of the Canadian Council on Social Development papers for the years 1920-41. Related materials are also at Queen's University, provincial collections on child welfare and social reform, the Historical Collections of the League of Nations, and the papers of prominent American friends such as Julia Lathrop, Grace Abbott, and Katharine Lenroot.

### Public and Private Spheres

We are not convinced that the "life-course" approach recommended by Trofimenkoff, which reinforces preoccupation with the rhythms of female experience dependent on marriage, reproduction, household, childrearing, and aging in relation to menopause and caretaking of grandchildren, was appropriate for our biography.<sup>10</sup>

The "life-course" approach has been used predominantly by historians of the *family*, to encompass individual and family development in relation to each other and transitions from one stage to the next, or from one role to another, both at the individual and familial levels. As Tamara Hareven points out, "some scholars have also misunderstood the life-course approach to fit strictly individual career patterns."<sup>11</sup> With Hareven, we reject the claim that Whitton's career pattern is compatible with the life-course approach, because her single status and significance lay outside the realm of reproduction and household. Some might claim this is not incompatible at all but merely "different." However, throughout the course of our writing, we found ourselves constantly addressing Whitton's "difference" — not to establish it in its most individualistic sense, but to discover the "difference" it made! Whitton's decision for celibate status and the subsequent homosocial world for which she opted is much more than being "different." It was more compelling to interpret these choices as *resistance to the hetero-relational paradigm*, than as just another version of the reproductive paradigm implicit in the life-course. Even a reversed version, that is, of seeing celibacy as "not being married" rather than marriage resistance too often reflects the het-

erorelational paradigm which empowers patriarchal ideology. Given Whitton's resistance and its social and psychological costs, we owed it to her to tell our readers about the struggle involved in resisting the ordinary.

When Whitton left home at age eighteen she never returned. When Whitton entered the workforce she remained in it. While she set up a household in the context of an intimate relationship with a female companion, this was in no way a "family," although arguably they were a "couple," for family implies an inter-generational unit. Without children and with heterosocial relationships primarily circumscribed to the workplace, Whitton's social and personal identity were frequently one and uniformly connected to the public domain and work force. Of course, the emphasis on "timing" and "transitions" in the life-course approach is crucial to understanding this experience, but what biography is not concerned with these? Surely timing and transitions are the essence of biography.

It is interesting to note the connections between life-course and Erik Erikson's model with regard to "timing" and "transitions" (i.e., "historical moment"). Indeed, at one stage in our writing, we considered not the life-course approach but Erikson's developmental stages, in order to relate the lesser known aspects of her childhood experience to the later crises of identity, intimacy and generativity, which all dramatically highlight her life. Certainly the last stage, ego-integrity, seemed peculiarly apt with regard to understanding the pathos of Whitton's old age. Nonetheless, we decided against this because we are opposed to using historical materials to illustrate psychosocial theories at the risk of subverting such materials to the demands of the model.

The concept of "transitions" is useful in understanding the function of personal correspondence in documenting the shift from schoolgirl and university student to the world of work. Whitton's correspondence with her friends from Queen's exposed the fears and hopes of young women moving into a post-suffrage society where able women cherish great dreams. Her later correspondence with a growing network of women friends and colleagues centered on Whitton's public life. From Emily Murphy and Helen R.Y. Reid to Julia Lathrop and Katharine Lenroot, no matter what the love and intimacy, the ties that bound them were based on common public aspirations. In light of this relationship, we have concluded there are grave risks involved in overemphasizing the separation of public and private spheres which has come to dominate much of women's history.

If we assume a continuity between past domesticity and contemporary feminist politics by focusing on women's private lives, we perpetuate the notion of women's domain as essentially private and personal.<sup>12</sup> Attempts to demonstrate an extension of private experience into the public realm — "the gradual enlargements of the social territory assigned to the domestic sphere" — have unwittingly become the academic reflection of the separation of private and public life, in which women's history can safely be consigned to an inferior place in historical scholarship and programs.<sup>13</sup>

Given historians' interest in public events and actors, the logical consequence of emphasizing women's infra- and intra-psychic lives is all too plain. Nor, as Hilda Smith has demonstrated, is the new social history — by "deemphasiz[ing] the public and political arena of leaders in order to seek information concerning the daily lives of common people either at home or at work" — the answer.<sup>14</sup> The major focus of social history continues to be collective male experience — against, of course, a substantial background of studies of male political and social leaders. In brief, the new scholarship has complemented conventional historical research in male leaders and public events. On the other hand, women's historians, when studying individual women, often emphasize their private lives, thereby confirming stereotypical views of male traditionalists that sexuality, reproduction and domesticity is what matters when considering women. Consequently, male historians can easily dismiss women's history as an academic version of housekeeping, firmly grounded in comfortable gynocentric assumptions about female nature and potential.<sup>15</sup>

In brief, such views merely affirm the old public man/private women dichotomy and the male in the irrelevance of female experience. Despite Carrol Smith-Rosenberg's admonition that women's historians should concentrate on the *unpolitical*, we are unconvinced, first, that it is "through women's personal lives that we can best understand the past" and, second, that even using Smith-Rosenberg's categories of the non-political, "schools, factories, churches and religious revivals, hospitals, prisons, brothels," historians are reduced to "the private realm, the interior of women's lives."<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, if we read "non-political" to include public action, there is ample scope for feminist biographers to study the lives of women outside those areas to which male historians have so easily pigeonholed them.

Given our objections to the overemphasis on personal lives and private spheres, our suspicions of the dangers inherent in psycho-historicizing our subject, and the fact that ours was not a literary biography, we strove to link Whitton's public and private experience. We have already noted that this was included in the criteria that distinguishes a *feminist* biography from any other biography. The female figures in her childhood — mother, grandmother, the neighbour Margaret MacLachlan — were seen as mentors whose support and encouragement, although psychologically important, always emphasized Lottie's public potential. Intense female friendships, although containing elements of the erotic, described a world largely lost to the post-Freudian world and told us as much about professional networking as about female social arrangements. Marriage resistance told us as much about the constraints on female career patterns as about individual anxieties concerning male/female relationships. The death of a beloved companion, while apparently a private crisis, was the catalyst for a breakthrough into politics. Without the usual life-course elements of widowhood and grandparenting, Whitton's estrangement from child welfare and the death of her companion stripped her of a professional family and left her a woman alone. It did not surprise us that in her quarter century of politics, Whitton's private life seemingly evaporated and only the public figure, the celebrity, remained.

### Women Worthies

We agree with Hilda Smith's point that Smith-Rosenberg underestimates the significance of women leaders as public figures. It was our judgement from the outset of our research that Whitton was a significant public figure. Initially we were convinced of this, *whatever her sex*; however, her sex made her of particular interest to us.

Trofimenkoff's discussion of the choice of subject for a feminist biography also raises some interesting questions which need to be addressed. She is uneasy lest such studies succumb to the seductions of writing about "women worthies" in just another version of the Great Man approach to history. We too were concerned about the emergence of the Whig Fallacy in women's history whose seeds are in the data historians traditionally use, that is, documentary evidence.<sup>17</sup> The use of diaries and personal letters only contributes to an overrepresentation of a middle and upper class consciousness. Racial, working class, ethnic and other minorities have been the "mute" of history for good reason. They did not leave behind a convenient store of documents for archivists to lovingly process and biographer-historians to pour over. Often they had neither

the luxury of time or of education and would have found it quite fanciful to leave their simple correspondence behind them.

Because of the middle class bias contained in traditional evidence, women's history has frequently taken on a "whig" aura with all its flaws: a manichean tale of female victimization and oppression (the struggle between good and evil); an abridged version of the present writ small; elitism; and finally, the suggestion of a teleological progression from an imperfect female past with feminist antecedents (sometimes in the remotest sense) to an enlightened feminist present.<sup>18</sup> This is particularly unfortunate in light of the beginnings of women's history as part of the revisionist reaction to traditional history.

Although Whitton had accompanied us through several years of previous research on child welfare, which began the dialogue with her materials, nevertheless we were bothered by a nagging sense that we were engaging in another "success" story about an exceptional female worthy. Initially we justified our efforts, if not our choice, by the fact of Whitton's modest economic and social beginnings, but found this problematic. Whitton herself fervently believed in the Petrarchean axiom that success comes to the deserving because of their innate virtues, and not through the support of others or even through fortuitous circumstance. Truly a "bookstraps" view of the world! As tempting as it was we resisted Whitton's view on the matter; to embrace them would compound the problem of her being a sport of history, an impossible role model of womanly true grit, an archetypal character in a patriarchal drama of oppression and personal triumph. Therefore we conceded a simpler justification for our choice. Women, whether exceptional or not, have been relegated to historical obscurity. We know little enough about individual women, even the female worthies. We agree with Hilda Smith and Natalie Zemon Davis that such women have a legitimate existence, one worthy of study, alongside black women, prostitutes, working class women, and lesbians.<sup>19</sup>

To date, women's history has included elements of "compensatory history" and, until we have an abundant literature base, we cannot afford to exclude *any* female historical actor from it.<sup>20</sup> This is not, however, to lack disciplinary discernment and merely write about women "just because they did anything at all."<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, it is only through studies of individual women can we understand the life dynamics of women analyzed in the aggregate.

We were interested in Trofimenkoff's observations on the outrageous woman — drolly described as “rogues in drag” — being the subjects of biography. While agreeing with her on most points, we do not share her seeming reservations, even suspicions, about such subjects. A biographer can use such a subject to feminist advantage even if she appears to be a singular case of non-conformity.<sup>22</sup> The conduct of the outrageous woman stretched the limits of our conceptions regarding gender roles and androcentric norms, and at times extends the logic of conventional argument or historical format. Like the study of psychosocial deviance or institutions such as penitentiaries, asylums, convents or brothels, such a subject can tell us much about the norms of society. The outrageous illustrates the inbuilt dualistic tensions of those norms and the constraints that conceptually and actually produce reaction. It is through the unconventional that feminists can cut deep into the bare bones of gender constraints, exposing them in all their oppressiveness and absurdity.

This is why radical feminist theory, and especially the radical lesbian contribution, stands out as the most incisive and trenchant of women's social criticism. It rids us of all the phallogocentric clutter leaving us to confront the bare essentials and deal with the basic assumptions. We are “kept honest” as we face the irrefutable logic of a hard counsel cautioning us against co-option and collusion. To use a quote from Jean Bethke Elshtain in *Public Man, Private Woman*, “the trouble is that thinking about these things is *not thrilling*, but often downright nasty. And when it's nasty then it's *most important*.”<sup>23</sup> The popular appeal of the outrageous need not vulgarize the genre or compromise our disciplines.

Many of Whitton's contemporaries — especially during her years in politics — viewed her as an outrageous woman. Most identified her difference as gender-specific, for example, man-hater and virago, but all saw her as feisty. Those who remember her years in Ottawa politics are prone to see her aggressive behaviour as directed at men only. Her life before municipal politics demonstrated that Whitton did not suffer fools or opponents gladly — whatever their gender. After many years of living with and reading Charlotte Whitton “neat,” we undoubtedly became inured to her. That we had become accustomed to her remarkable abrasiveness was brought home to us by the response of two women historians who commented on our paper at the 1987 annual meeting of the American Historical Association. For them, “Whitton unbridled” was a revelation. That spontaneous reaction reminded us of what we had always known but what historical familiarity had cloaked — that Whitton, as person and as life, by

hammering against social and gender constraints, provided us with a means of understanding female experience in twentieth-century Canada.

### Conclusion

We have noted that women's history has emphasized the private domain and domestic sphere in a woman-centered approach in contrast to the androcentric biases of traditional history and historical biography (with regard to male subjects and phallogocentric scholars). Feminist biography of necessity emphasizes its subject's public world, in contrast to literary biography which often deals with inner states and private relationships. This dilemma alerted us to the problems involved in selecting and balancing the psycho-dynamics of Whitton's private and public worlds. Whitton's professional and public roles made her the perfect subject for a feminist biography. Even without her feminist writings, her visibility and the fact that other women recognized her leadership made her the perfect subject. We did not “make” her biography as much as she made it for us.

Because we initially were drawn to our subject through her career in child welfare, we reject unequivocally Carrol Smith-Rosenberg's claim that, if women like Jane Addams and Margaret Fuller (or Whitton) had not existed, it would not make any difference to the study of traditional history or public events. The emphasis on women's private lives produces a solipsistic, even biosocial, view of women's history, limits its horizon, and validates the spurious axiom that women's anatomy is her destiny. Whitton *did* matter within her profession and, according to Jean Pigott, created the climate that made it increasingly possible for women to enter Ottawa politics in the 1960s.<sup>24</sup>

We “discovered” Charlotte Whitton through traditional historical channels as she was the key transitional figure in our study of Canadian child welfare, *Discarding the Asylum* (1983). It was inevitable that we would pursue this relationship when the subject's personality dominated our initial research. In turn, *No Bleeding Heart* (1987) has led one of us into further research of the role of women in international organizations in general and at the League of Nations in particular.<sup>25</sup> Because we wanted to hear *her* voice, understand *her* world view, appreciate *her* social reality, sympathize with *her* struggles, comprehend *her* view of success and failure, we avoided the interview method. We did not want to interpret Whitton's life through the eyes and words of her contemporaries and then have to distill their psychological projections and perceptions of past events. However, when we spoke

informally to any of her contemporaries, we were gratified to have traditional historical method validated.

For almost eight years, Charlotte Whitton has been part of our lives — “a miniature passion.” She shared our table, our vacations, our conversation, our friendships, and proved to be an intriguing, magnetic, generous, perverse and aggravating companion. Her voice in life was clear, even noisy. If we heard it afterwards it was because she would not be silenced. She commanded that we listen. If we have not recorded it faithfully, it was a matter of intellectual failure and not lack of good will.

## NOTES

1. *No Bleeding Heart: Charlotte Whitton, A Feminist on the Right*, University of British Columbia Press, 1987.
2. A sobering reminder of this trap, though in an unrelated field, was seen in a recent West End production of Frederico Garcia Lorca's play “The House of Bernarda Alba.” While also a brooding metaphor of incipient fascism, despite an *all-female* cast, the invisible male principles dominated the production. Yet no man appeared or even spoke. Not even Glenda Jackson, the formidable matriarch of an all-female household, could neutralize the pervasive atmosphere of victimization and a symbolism so oppressively phallic. Here was truly an example of art reinforcing life, where female identity was found in a hetero-reality that stultified women's lives. No male reviewer noted the irony of this production, seeing it as a sympathetic portrayal of women, not as another triumph of patriarchy!
3. Elaine Showalter, “Literary Criticism,” *Signs* 1 (1975), p. 437; and Cary Nelson, “Envoys of Otherness: Difference and Continuity in Feminist Criticism,” in *For Alma Mater: Theory and Practice in Feminist Scholarship*, Paula A. Treichler, Cheris Kramarac, and Beth Stafford (eds.), University of Illinois Press, 1985, p. 94.
4. Dale Spender, “On Feminism and Propaganda,” in *For Alma Mater*, p. 312.
5. See “Charlotte Whitton Meets the ‘Last Best West’: The Politics of Alberta Child Welfare, 1929-49,” *Prairie Forum* 6 (Fall 1981), pp. 143-163; and “‘Making the Way More Comfortable’: Charlotte Whitton's Child Welfare Career,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 17 (Winter 1982-83), pp. 33-45. Compare these with a later article, “Chastity as Power: Charlotte Whitton and the Ascetic Ideal,” *American Review of Canadian Studies* 15 (Winter 1985), pp. 389-403, to see our change of perspective.
6. “History's Two Bodies,” *American Historical Review* 93 (February 1988), p. 30.
7. A case in point is the division on grounds of race and language between Whitton and Trofimenkoff's subject, Thérèse Casgrain. Whitton praised the I.O.D.E. for ex-communicating Casgrain because of her anti-conscriptionist stand. “Like the American she came late [into women's rights] and was not among those who fought at Marne.” Whitton continued: “her very right to speak and to stand for parliament were hers because of British freedom and the fact that she was a British subject.” Charlotte Whitton to Juliette Fauteaux, Ottawa Chelsea Club, February 2, 1946, Whitton Papers, Vol. 5, Public Archives of Canada.
8. Feminist history is coming of age in that it is more able to contend with the “underside” of women's relationships with each other and their capitulation in patriarchal society. A good example of this new analysis is found in Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987.
9. The “Woman-Identified-Woman, Notes for a Third Year; Women's Liberation,” in *Radical Feminism*, Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine, and Anita Rapone (eds.), New York, 1973, pp. 240-245. Also Eliane Silverman, “Writing Canadian Women's History 1970-1982: An Historiographical Analysis,” *Canadian Historical Review* 63 (December 1982), pp. 513-533, and reply by Rooke and Schnell, *Canadian Historical Review* 64 (June 1983), pp. 289-292. Also see Shiela Jeffries, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, London: Pandora Press, 1985; and Barbara Levy Simon, *Never Married Women*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, forthcoming.
9. Kathryn Kish Sklar, “Hull House in the 1890s: A Community of Women Reformers,” *Signs* 10 (Summer 1985), pp. 658-677; and R.L. Schnell, “Female Separatism and Institution-Building: Continuity and Discontinuity in Canadian Child Welfare, 1913-1935,” *International Review of History and Political Sciences*, forthcoming.
10. See Smith's (1985) extensive discussion of the “life cycle” methodology, p. 290, footnote 22, and pp. 278-283; also Ellen Dubois' harsh criticism of the approach, especially with regard to Carrol Smith-Rosenberg's work in “Politics and Culture in Women's History: A Symposium,” *Feminist Studies* 6 (Spring 1980) pp. 28-36.
11. Glen H. Elder, Jr., “Families and Lives: Some Development in Life-Course Studies,” in *Family History at the Crossroads: A Journal of Family History Reader*, Tamara Hareven and Andrejs Plakans (eds.), Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987, pp. 179-199; and Hareven, “Family History at the Crossroads,” *ibid.*, p. xi.
12. Hilda L. Smith, “Female Bonds and the Family: Recent Directions in Women's History” in *For Alma Mater*, pp. 272-291; and “Female Bonds and the Family: Continuing Doubts,” *OAH Newsletter* 15 (February 1987), pp. 13-14.
13. Having come to our conclusions before discovering Smith's articles, we were gratified to find support for our position. Despite Veronica Strong-Boag's comment about the fascination with professional women in the twentieth century, in point of fact there seems little of this feminist history and certainly *biography* in Canada. “The Girl of the New Day: Canadian Working Women in the 1920s,” *Labour/Le Travailleur* 4 (1979), pp. 131-132.
13. Daniel Scott Smith, “Family Limitation, Sexual Control and Domestic Feminism in Victorian America,” in *A Heritage of Her Own*, Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth H. Pleck (eds.), New York: Touchstone Books, 1979, p. 239.
14. Smith (1987), p. 13.
15. While agreeing with Hilda Smith on the dangers of concentrating on women's private experience, we appreciate the value of diaries and letters in illuminating family time and women's culture. See Margaret Conrad, “‘Sundays Always Make Me Think of Home’: Time and Place in Canadian's Women's History,” in *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History*, Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman (eds.), Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1986, pp. 67-81.
16. Smith rejects the notion of women's culture [family and domestic] as “outside male defined society” (p.283). She points out these fulfill sexual functions and roles and are the most fundamental norms of male-defined society, and indeed, created for male convenience.
16. Carol Smith-Rosenberg, “The New Woman and the New History,” *Feminist Studies* 3 (Fall 1975), p. 185.
17. Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, London: G. Bell & Sons, 1968; and Sidney Hook, *The Hero in History*, New York: The Humanities Press, 1950.
18. Linda Kealey, “A Healthy Revisionism?” *CCWH Newsletter* (November 1984) and Rooke, “The New Whigs?” *CCWH Newsletter* (May 1985). Also Alison Prentice, “Women's History in Canada: A Project in Process,” *Colloquium on Social History*, Carleton University, June 1982.
19. See Smith, (1985, 1987); and Natalie Zemon Davis, “Women's History in Transition: The European Case,” *Feminist Studies* 3 (Spring/Summer 1976): pp. 83-103.
20. Gerda Lerner (and Joan Kelly) have argued for three co-existing modes of women's history: compensatory, contribution history, and social relations history. *No Bleeding Heart* appears to contain ele-

ments of the three modes — although not intentionally. See “Placing Women in U.S. History: Definitions and Challenges,” *Feminist Studies* 3 (Fall 1975): pp. 5-14 and *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

21. Lerner (1979), p. 13.

22. One remarkable and unlikely example of this point is Judith C. Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986. Apart from the author's unhappiness with the subtitle, she exploits esoteric documentary evidence but compensates for it by placing the subject in a cultural milieu quite unlike our own and an institutional setting entirely dissimilar to stereotypical perceptions of convent life. Moreover, she eloquently argues a history of “mentalities” and convincingly recreates the conceptual and linguistic conventions that could not comprehend female homosexuality. Consequently,

she questions the idea of a lesbian “continuum.” The book illustrates a gender system that abhorred gender role confusion (e.g., cross-dressing) rather than sexual deviance in women. See especially pp. 17, 171-173, backnote 54.

Any subscriber to the *Women's Review of Books* can attest to the uses feminist scholarship has made of the “outrageous” women.

23. Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981, p. xi. Elshtain is hardly a “radical” feminist, but her intellectual power transforms her work into radical critiques.

24. See Hilda L. Smith's (1985) criticism of this issue, p. 279; and “The Prime of Miss Jean Pigott,” *City Woman* (Spring 1984).

25. R.L. Schnell is in the midst of a study of the campaign to create a women's domain in the Social Questions Section of the League of Nations, 1919-1945.

Misters:

Today I've had a dose —  
a double dose of all of you.  
When I don't bite back, returning  
drop for drop the venom of your stings,  
the poisons gather, fester,  
to fight the inflammation with this  
Declaration — this poem of

PUS

No doubt your offer's generous,  
but, having slept already in the bed I made,  
I've decided not to trade my nakedness  
for the hair shirt off your back  
or join you on your rack.  
Having finished drinking the wine  
of my own wrath's stores, I wish  
to decline to dine in the bright  
lightning of your swift swords.  
Having almost cleared the lien  
on my House of Atreus, I'm not  
keen to offer my purse to time-  
share a condo under similar curse.  
After opening that box to defame  
the name of female culture, I'm not  
that curious about life on the rocks,  
being de-livered daily by your vulture.

Since lately I've conscientiously  
paid my dues, I've decided to forgo  
visitations to your imprisoned blues.

Ginnah Howard  
Gilbertsville, New York