

author and to the National Museum of Man for providing us with a useful book, both author and publisher would have been well advised to have delayed publication while the author worked on some revisions to her manuscript.

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A Harvest Yet To Reap A History of Prairie Women. Linda Rasmussen et al. (eds.). Toronto: The Women's Press. Pp. 240.

The epigraph which introduces A Harvest Yet to Reap quotes Nellie McClung, who vowed that she "would write it from their side of the fence." Like the four authors of the book, she was indignant that common lives remained unrecorded, deemed insignificant. Women's experiences, gathered from the writings of the elite and non-elite who lived them and the men who observed them, are linked by Candace Savage's introductions to each of the volume's seven chapters. The quotations from primary sources and the reproductions of photographs form a history of white women in the prairie provinces--"a collective history from the tangle of individual experiences." A Harvest Yet to Reap is also a search by its authors for contemporary women's place in a continuum. They sought foremothers, a his-

tory of their own, in women whom they believed were not merely assistants of men engaged in "real life," they found spiritual resources in the details of rural women's life cycles and personal experiences. Expecting quaintness, they found heroines in seemingly unlikely places, among the people who do the work of the world.

We began to realize how powerful our image of the past had been in limiting our sense of our own possibilities. There is strength in the knowledge that among our foremothers were women who confronted their pain and frustration with sincerity and intelligence, just as we try to meet our own. As prairie women, we are part of a tradition, rooted in the past. (p.9)

The first section, "Moving West," describes the harsh conditions under which migrating women had to work. Sought by men like Clifford Sifton, who demanded quality in the shape of stout wives with six children, by marriage agencies offering a prospect better than "living and dying as old maids," by bachelors desperate for company, food and an extra pair of hands, they came. They were deceived: promised prosperity, the prairie ate them instead. Homes were sodden huts, failures frequent, larders meager. Nonetheless, this evidence indicates that some of the women felt that they were fulfilling a special destiny,

"making a home out of barren virgin land" rather than spending their lives at "silly pink teas in the cities." (p. 32) Like their fore-mother, Catherine Parr Trail, they may have been denying furiously, salvaging self-esteem; or perhaps they had thoroughly internalized an image of themselves as mothers of a great new race, stronger and braver than those left behind.

The second chapter, "Life on the Prairie," also demonstrates some women's intimations that their life had special meaning, that "we were a part. . . of a greater purpose of awakening, of creation, and of growth." (p. 62) I imagine that that sense sustained them through the physical and psychic isolation which is the theme of the chapter but I would suggest also that their sense of a private mission inhibited women's understanding of their situations. Loneliness, intense physical labour, exhaustion, excessive childbearing, sickness, insanity and death--experiences shared at times among women--were, however, for the most part experienced solely within a family, not a communal structure. As prairie women were isolated by distance, language and custom, their travails became private and personal, possibly shared with husbands or conveyed to children. Their anxieties and fears did not transcend the familial domain to enter the social, let alone a female environment to create an incipient

feminist consciousness. Strength and misery were private. The farmer's wife, with whom Hamlin Garland and The Farmer's Advocate sympathized, derived her psychic identity in the farmer's realm--the isolated farm--and not in society, not in a female social identity.

If so, I believe we must recast our scheme for understanding the origins of the women's rights movement on the prairies. Savage suggests in the succeeding chapter, "Rethinking the Role," that the prescriptive literature of the early twentieth century called upon women to be submissive wives and nurturant mothers. Many women accepted a definition of themselves as self-denying but others, she writes, resisted. Inspired by news from the women's movement in the United States and England, encouraged by images of the "new woman," and finally urged to work during the first World War by government propaganda, prairie women were lauded for the commanding qualities they once suppressed. Then, with the soldiers' return, women, reminded of their biological destiny, returned to the unpaid labour of the home. Women who once glimpsed their own possibilities, being suddenly shut off from them, sought legal and political redress. However, the primary evidence in the chapter suggests a different story. The women who describe their loneliness and labour seek no political solution, nor do most of them attempt to alter the hierarchic

family pattern. "I am thankful I am all right again, now only much thinner than I used to be but none the worse for that," wrote Martha after a particularly grueling year as a domestic. (p. 102) The exception is Mary Nicolaeff, who in 1915 described her economic dependence on her first husband, an educated man, and on her second, a "wage slave;" clearly, she had brought with her Russian intellectual precepts. (p. 92) The few unidentifiable non-elite women who hoped for more, looked to education as the solution to a despicable dependence; yet, educators and ministers were admonishing their listeners that women's education must serve only to enhance the happy home.

The sources in the chapter are drawn entirely from the writings of professional women, journalists and writers, or from UFWA pamphlets. The evidence, or rather the lack of evidence, may cause us to question the authors' contention that women were redefining their realm. Some may have been. Those who encouraged others to consider paid labour as compatible with their womanly nature were women whose names we know--Miriam Green Ellis, Louise McKinney, Francis Beynon--and not the masses of nameless ones. They were the middle-class women who were later to become leaders of the suffrage movement, who had jobs they considered socially useful, who had already worked out their own psychic accommodations and their arrangements

with their men. McKinney herself wrote that "the average woman instinctively loves home life." (p.118) She seemed safely to assume that only exceptional women like herself would urge for the expansion of women's sphere.

The next chapter, "Organizing for Reform," contains the same imbalance. Articulate women like Nellie McClung wrote that farm women came to UFWA meetings; pamphlets urged reform of sanitary measures and encouraged cooperative buying. But where now are the accounts by the membership? The photographs show meetings and sewing circles; women were meeting together. But the visual and literary sources do not prove that the masses of women were seeking political and economic redistribution. The quotations drawn entirely from middle-class sources suggest rather that leadership was more significant than mass disaffection, intense though that may have been, in reforming the legal status of women. In Chapter Five, "Changing the Law," the evidence, drawn mainly from letters to newspapers, suggests that changes in property laws engendered more enthusiasm among farm wives than did agitation for the suffrage, which follows in the next chapter, "Winning the Vote." Farm wives may have been made aware of the tenuousness of their economic position by the urgings of middle-class leadership, may have seen that failing the good will of their husbands they were precariously perch-



Photograph from the cover of A Harvest Yet to Reap.

ed between farmhouse and poorhouse, and may have been aroused enough by anxiety for themselves and their children to write to newspapers supporting reform of property laws. The campaign for suffrage inspired less animus in people who, I would suggest, defined themselves in a private capacity. The arguments by suffrage proponents may not have been telling enough to move them to action that they felt would not affect them personally. Could Francis Beynon really convince farm women that the "ballot is one weapon in this fight for the health, chastity, and life of these children?" (p. 176) Did rural wives really believe the Grain Growers' Guide when it called for "a new moral impetus, a saner outlook, and wider sympathy to enter into the settlement of our public questions with the advent of women into public affairs?" (p. 178) Farm women perhaps were not deceived by such rhetoric into believing that the ballot would change their lives.

If farm women were not yet questioning the whole nexus of their personal relationships--the hierarchic nature of their private lives in which they still lived out the God-man, man-woman, parent-child correlatives--why then should we assume, unless we have evidence to vindicate us, that they actively sought political reform? It appears that prairie women were not engaged in forging new private roles,

were not concerned with altering political realities precisely because they defined themselves as part of a private realm they could not transcend. Collective action--and even that that was hierarchic--remained the preserve of the few educated and articulate women who self-consciously asserted their bonds with each other.

The evidence collected by Rasmussen et al. does not suggest that we can look to prairie women for the roots of contemporary feminist activism. For fortitude and stoicism, yes; for travails we know personally or vicariously, yes for the bonds of sisterhood: I think not. As a beginning point from which to reap the harvest of prairie women's past the book is superb, the photos wonderful, the sources rich in detail. As a guide for historical analysis the volume is, as the authors suggest, a modest beginning. We have, in our own scholarly realm, as much work to do as the farm women had in theirs.

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