

BOOK REVIEW

Wheat and Woman. Georgina Binnie-Clarke. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007; lxx + 313 pages; photographs; ISBN: 0802038131; \$18.87 (paper).

Wheat and Woman offers a vivid description of the struggles and challenges surrounding the first three years of Georgina Binnie-Clarke's farming "experiment" on the Saskatchewan farm she bought in 1905. While feeding pigs and milking cows, scraping floors, cooking meals for employees, cutting wood, operating heavy farm machinery and harvesting, this British immigrant gentlewoman stubbornly contends with the harshness of uncompromising Canadian weather, her own lack of agricultural knowledge and experience, frequent disappointments over unreliable farm aids, the loss of her beloved "four-footed friends," and most importantly, the constant lack of money, in order to disprove the notion that, as a woman, she "can't."

Binnie-Clarke's book is not only a woman farmer's diary but also a criticism of the patriarchal system of the time that prevented many women from achieving their goals. According to law, as a single woman Binnie-Clarke could not obtain a free homestead but had to purchase one for \$5000. This financial discrimination led to Binnie-Clarke's close association with the suffrage movement and her (unsuccessful) fight with Ottawa for equal treatment of single women aspiring to become farmers.

However, Binnie-Clarke's inspiring story is an incomplete feminist manifesto that must be understood in the context of first-wave feminism during which white women situated themselves as the heroines of women's struggle against patriarchy and fought exclusively for their own rights. Even though she criticized the law that discriminated against her, Binnie-Clarke failed to acknowledge her privileges—privileges that many non-white immigrant women farmers did not have. Facing "the double burden of racism and sexism" (Sugiman, Jin Guo: *Voices of Chinese Canadian Women*, 1992, p.20), immigrant non-white women lacked important village support networks that Binnie-Clarke, as a white woman, enjoyed. Moreover, Binnie-Clarke could attend bridge parties and dances, ride horses, shoot, read books for leisure, become personal friends with bankers, politicians and rich influential people, and eventually document her experiences in a book. She could freely leave and return to Canada, unlike many Southeast Chinese women farmers subjected to expensive head taxes upon entry to Canada. Furthermore, Binnie-Clarke did not have a needy family overseas depending on her earnings and, should her farming "experiment" fail, she could probably resume her prospective journalistic career in New York. Also, to ease her financial difficulties she could rely on money transfers from her investments in a London business, unlike many black women who farmed lands in southwestern Ontario

while their men worked on Canadian railroads as porters (Brand, *No Burden to Carry*, 1991).

The tale of the struggle of white upper-class women against patriarchy is not the only reason why *Wheat and Woman* is an important document of Canada's social history. It is also important for what it omits—non-white women farmers' experiences of discrimination and injustice and an acknowledgement of the perseverance with which they performed their duties under the double burden of racism and sexism. Thus, *Wheat and Woman* documents the narrow view of equality held by white Canadian women of those times and creates the false impression that only notable white women like Binnie-Clark could.

Sylvia Reitmanova
Memorial University of Newfoundland