

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

SMALL GROUPS OF (CANADIAN) WOMEN: REVIEW ESSAY

Comparative Women's History. New Approaches, Anne Cova, ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006; xii+185 pages; ISBN 0-88033-999-3; \$30.00US (cloth).

In the Days of Our Grandmothers. A Reader in Aboriginal Women's History in Canada, Mary-Ellen Kelm and Lorna Townsend, eds. Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2006; xi+434 pages; ISBN 978-0-8020-7960-2; \$75.00 (cloth).

Unsettled Pasts. Reconceiving the West Through Women's History, Sarah Carter, Lesley Erickson, Patricia Roome, and Char Smith, eds. Calgary, Alberta: University of Calgary Press, 2005; xii+420 pages; ISBN 1-55238-177-3; \$44.95 (paper).

Family Life and Sociability in Upper and Lower Canada, 1780-1870: A View from Diaries and Family Correspondence, Françoise Noël. Montreal, Quebec & Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003. ix+372 pages; ISBN 0-7735-2445-2; \$49.95 (cloth).

The Letters of Margaret Butcher: Missionary-Imperialism on the North Pacific Coast, Mary-Ellen Kelm, ed. Calgary, Alberta: University of Calgary Press, 2006; xxxi+273 pages; ISBN 1-55238-166-8; \$29.95 (paper).

Household Politics: Montreal Families and Postwar Reconstruction, Magda Fahrni. Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2005; xii+279 pages; ISBN 0-8020-4888-9; \$29.95 (paper).

"The underlying assumption of national history is that each nation - its landscape, its political and cultural self-expression, its rise and fall - is unique and distinctive." Thus says Ann Taylor Allen in "Lost in Translation? Women's History in Transnational and Comparative Perspective," one of the five excellent essays (including editor Anne Cova's substantial historiographic introduction) that make up *Comparative Women's History: New Approaches* (95). Certainly uniqueness is particularly important for Canada, which has always felt the need for distance from the mother-country across the Atlantic and the neo-imperial neighbour to the south.

The drive to focus on a distinctive national women's history for Canada is also fuelled today by feminist scholars' reluctance to generalize about "women." As that concept has come under attack, there has been increased attention to subgroups among those perceived by themselves or others as women. In addition, the relatively new concept of "intersectionality" points correctly to the important negative impact on women of systems of domination such as racilization and class. Academic women accordingly turn a

somewhat guilt-ridden attention to those women who are the most disadvantaged. As a result, the lives of women now tend to be examined in terms of constantly expanding numbers of subcategories.

However, if we use our nation as the basic context, we can define more manageable subjects in the shape of targeted groups of women within that unit. Nowadays researchers often direct their attention to those women who make up, within Canada, what we see as the most subordinated categories. At the same time, perhaps because we have become a bit chary of what has been mislabelled victimology, we tend towards narratives that demonstrate how well different women cope with their differing situations. Unlike Mary Wollstonecraft on the wrongs of woman, we now concentrate on what could be described as small groups of (Canadian) women righting themselves. And certainly that is heartening for all of us. Unfortunately, however, this approach, good-hearted as it is, does not tell us what those women share. Apart from the convenience that maps provide, what makes these women's stories *Canadian*? Nor do their histories necessarily tell us much about Canada herself and what uniqueness defines her.

Cova's volume (*Comparative Women's History*) provides an excellent analytic and bibliographic account of women's history worldwide - but there is almost no reference in it to Canadian women's history. This absence suggests that studies of the history of women in this country remain relatively isolated and fragmentary. So too do the five other volumes reviewed here, in spite of their many excellences.

In the Days of Our Grandmothers gathers together recent work on Aboriginal women in Canada, ranging from new insights on women's involvement with the fur trade to re-examinations of the spirituality of Kateri Tekakwitha and the career of E. Pauline Johnson. *Unsettled Pasts* consists of studies of women in the areas now British Columbia and the three prairie provinces. Subjects include settlers, immigrants, Natives, and mixed-blood women, including Louis Riel's less well-known sister. The three other books almost span the country for the more recent periods of Canadian history, drawing on a variety of sources and approaches. Françoise Noël uses family letters and diaries to look at nineteenth-century middle-class life in what would become Ontario and Quebec (*Family Life and Sociability in Upper and Lower Canada, 1780-1870*). Mary-Ellen Kelm presents, with 59 pages of commentary and 23 of notes, the edited letters of a teacher employed by the Women's Missionary Society on the north Pacific Coast in the early twentieth century (*The Letters of Margaret Butcher*). Finally, Magda Farnhi analyzes how family life intersected with state and church and the voluntary sector in Montreal in the period following the end of World War Two (*Household Politics: Montreal Families and Postwar Reconstruction*). The volumes by Noël and Farnhi might perhaps be better thought of as family histories, but they also fall squarely within the traditions of women's history in Canada.

Farnhi's *Household Politics* most successfully presents what we now call a "thick" narrative. For example, she recounts the absorbing story of the "Cent-Mariés" (actually 105 couples whose simultaneous weddings were sponsored and supported by the Jeunesse Ouvrière Catholique in 1939). Unusually for that time, these working-class brides all wore white. Even more unusually, a Catholic Action group, the Ligue Ouvrière Catholique, kept in touch with these families after the group ceremonies and thus provided invaluable information about urban life. But why is this *Canadian* women's history, apart from taking place in Montreal? It was apparently Queen Victoria who first made white

weddings fashionable. Nor was the lay Catholic movement unique to Canada.

In these five books, as it happens, one dimension stands out as distinctive, either as a central presence or a noticeable absence. Native women, the topic of *In the Days of Our Grandmothers*, are major subjects in Margaret Butcher's letters, written while she worked in a residential school for Native girls. They also, of course, appear largely in *Unsettled Pasts'* accounts of Western history. By contrast, the apparent absence of Aboriginal women from the family documents that are the source of *Family Life and Sociability* is striking. Certainly there were Aboriginal women in Upper and Lower Canada in the nineteenth century. Has Noël, perhaps inadvertently, demonstrated how little the rising middle class was aware of the First Nations? Similarly, in Farhni's *Household Politics*, it is noteworthy that the Natives just across the bridge were apparently as invisible in the 1940s as they were to remain for most of the rest of the twentieth century.

This Aboriginal dimension, something not to be expected in studies of, say, British or French women in Europe (and it would be different for the other nations of this hemisphere), points the direction to what is distinctive about the wider history of women in Canada. Only with difficulty could the Native peoples be fitted, even forced into those geo-political structures that define Canadian history. "The border troubled us," write Kelm and Townsend in their introduction to *In the Days of Our Grandmothers* (8). As their collection demonstrates, just about the only thing that the very diverse populations of Aboriginal women shared in *Canada* was the need to deal with the same bundle of *Canadian* attitudes, laws, policies, and regulations. Therefore, it is in relation to Aboriginal women that we see most starkly what shaped Canada, the guiding assumptions of the nascent nation's Christian, Old World traditions and institutions. But a similar process of controlling and shaping affected all women in what became Canada.

Native women provide the most distinctively Canadian examples of the situation of all Canadian women, because their history demonstrates the most clearly that a key element of national distinctiveness is the apparatus of public control. Fear of essentialism should not prevent us from realizing that women's history is necessarily subaltern history. The impact of the Canadian state on women is evident in all the Canadian books reviewed here, whether the topic is welfare policies in postwar Montreal or marriage in nineteenth century Upper and Lower Canada. As these books demonstrate, the state-supported hierarchies of gender matter, for Aboriginal women and also for their dissimilar sisters.

At the same time, caution is needed in respect to the tropes of post-colonialism. Here the disciplines of history come into play. The details matter enormously; they help us to avoid the devils of over-theorizing. Thus, the editor of Margaret Butcher's letters presents her as an agent of imperialism and the subject of gender hierarchy, a deprived spinster subservient to male control and religious direction. But Butcher's letters were self-evidently written by an intrepid and joyful traveller who inspired devotion in her Native students and saw marriage as a partnership of equals.

Details are not without their own dangers, of course. "As traditionally pursued, national history faces a problem: the closer its focus, the fuzzier its view," writes Ann Taylor Allen. "Without comparing it to others, the historian cannot assess what is distinctive to the nation and what it shares with others" ("Lost in Translation," 95). The Canadian books reviewed here support her point. As some of them note, their close readings need to be part of a larger whole. Canadian women's history is more than ready to advance past filling in the gaps in the pictures of the past. By studying women in Canada, we can begin to

understand Canada herself. We will have to do so both consciously and comparatively, sensitive to the impact of the state as it supports the hierarchies Canadian women live within.

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