

# WOMEN'S STUDIES IN FOCUS

## "Get Thee to a Nunnery!": Uses of English Canadian Convent Archives Across Feminist Disciplines

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### Abstract

The archives of Canadian convents house significant and plentiful resources. Until recent decades, these have been underutilized, particularly in English Canada. This paper examines the ways in which convent archives might be used by feminist researchers across the disciplines.

### Résumé

Les archives des couvents canadiens renferment une abondance de ressources importantes, qui jusqu'à récemment ont été sous-utilisées, particulièrement au Canada anglais. Cet article étudie les façons dont les archives des couvents peuvent être utilisées par les chercheuses féministes dans l'ensemble des disciplines.

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A short time ago, I had coffee with my favourite archivist, a Roman Catholic sister who, with great competence and care, maintains the archives of the Ursuline Sisters of the Chatham Union, an order of teaching sisters in Southwestern Ontario. During my years as a doctoral student conducting historical research (Bondy 2007), I relied heavily on Sister Ruth Marie's expertise, her intimate knowledge of the contents of the Ursuline archives, and her thoughtful suggestions. Just as important to me as a young researcher was our shared love of history and her example of tireless devotion to her work. Today, when I visit my dear friend, I am always curious to hear about her on-going projects in the archives and the latest requests she has received from both academic and amateur researchers.

Canadian convent archives are a treasure trove of information about women religious (commonly referred to as "sisters" or "nuns") and their communities, and in many cases the contents of these archives span centuries and extend to the present day. Of course, historians of women religious know this, and work in this exciting subfield of women's history has grown significantly in recent decades. While scholars in French Canada have amassed a significant body of historical research on convent culture, including numerous monographs,<sup>1</sup> English Canada has only of late entered in the sub-field in a significant way. The 2007 publication of *Changing Habits: Women's Religious Orders in Canada*, edited by Elizabeth Smyth, features more than a dozen articles by scholars of women religious, including not only historians, but also architects, sociologists, theologians and material culturalists. However, only one of the authors avows and engages an explicitly

feminist analysis (Leonard 2007), and in her discussion of further research Smyth advises that the field is open for much additional study, including areas involving "gender, power, and race dynamics" and "the clash between conservative patriarchy and feminism that continues to be played out within both ecclesiastical and secular settings" (Smyth 2007, 16).

On a personal note, having spent much time in the archives of a few religious communities in English Canada, I can't help but marvel at how underutilized are their contents, not only by historians in other closely related subfields (Church History, for example), but especially, as evident in the aforementioned publication, by feminist scholars. There is a certain irony in the fact that women religious and their unique, homosocial institutions have rarely been the subjects of inquiry by scholars who adopt a feminist analysis. As educated women in eras when few women had access to higher learning, as women who served and continue to serve women and children in their roles as teachers, nurses, and social service workers, and as enduring communities of women who function within a highly patriarchal Church, women religious surely merit the consideration of feminist scholarship.

Therefore, I am writing this article with a three-fold purpose: first, I will offer a brief history of the use and accessibility of convent archives in English Canada; second, I will offer suggestions as to how feminist scholars might more fully utilize the contents of convent archives; and third, I will offer a brief description of a current research project in which I am engaged which demonstrates how convents' archival materials might extend beyond the traditional scholarly study of the history of women religious by engaging a feminist analysis. Convent archives, in preserving local histories, data on educational, medical and social service institutions, detailed genealogies of members and affiliates, architectural plans and real estate documents, and countless other aspects of women's history and culture, have potentially broad applications and could make significant contributions to feminist scholarship across the disciplines.

## Access

Marta Danylewycz's groundbreaking monograph *Taking the Veil: An Alternative to Marriage, Motherhood, and Spinsterhood in Quebec, 1840-1920* has, in the more than two decades since its publication, greatly influenced the study of women religious, both in French and English Canada. In her book she noted that,

Religious women in Quebec are beginning to speak out. Long regarded by themselves and society as outside the purview of sociological and historical inquiry, they are breaking the silence that has surrounded their lives. They welcome political, philosophical, and personal discussion and no longer shy away from the queries of journalists and reporters about life in the cloister.

(Danylewycz 1987, 13)

Prior to this time, as Danylewycz implies, women religious kept to themselves, and were not welcoming of outsiders. Only after the Church reforms of the mid-1960s did sisters do away with such physical barriers as the cloister, the grille, extended periods of silence, and the traditional, enveloping habit, so it is not surprising that it took some time before religious communities were amenable to researchers. In earlier decades, the extensive and, in many cases, meticulously maintained archives of women's religious communities had been for the use of the sisters themselves, for the purposes of preserving their own heritage and histories. As historian Elizabeth Smyth notes, this record keeping was done under the mandate of Canon Law, which required that religious communities maintain archives and also that they record the day-to-day lives of their organizations in annals or chronicles (Smyth 1997, 103). Although many of the documents archived were originally intended as "venues for community development and instruction intended for an exclusive audience of nuns and sisters" (Smyth 1997, 109), more recently they have provided the fodder for exciting new studies within the field of women's history.

In the mid-1980s, Danylewycz was among the first to benefit from the new openness of religious communities to researchers, conducting research in an area of

women's history that had been seldom explored by scholarly historians; her successors in English Canada, numerous in recent years, owe the late Danylewycz a great debt in this regard (Bruno-Jofré 2005; MacDonald 2004; Smyth 2007; Sullivan 2005). Certainly, as the increase in the number of publications indicates, convent archives have indeed opened their doors to scholars more frequently in recent decades. Even so, while the recent work of historians of women religious, including my own, makes a vital contribution to the work of women's history, my experience conducting research in convent archives has led me to believe that this is just one way that convent archives might be utilized, and that the documentary materials therein might also be of interest to feminist researchers from across the disciplines.

### Applications

As a feminist historian who teaches Women's Studies and values interdisciplinarity in my own work, I am always cognizant of the ways in which my own research extends across disciplinary boundaries. As a result of the long stretches of time spent in a few convents' archives, notably those of the aforementioned Ursuline Sisters and those of the Ontario Province of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary, I have considered numerous ways in which feminist researchers might use the evidence therein beyond the more obvious and traditional historical applications. While some of the suggestions which follow are historical in nature, the last few point to new directions for contemporary research which might utilize convents' diverse archival materials.

Among the most common requests received by convent archives are appeals from amateur historians conducting genealogical research. With little to go on but family lore about great aunts who entered the convent decades ago, many people contact convent archivists seeking further information, eager to learn the elusive details about these often romanticized relatives. Frequently, amateur genealogists are pleasantly surprised to find that convent archives often house detailed

records of the lives of individual sisters and, in the case of teaching orders, their students.

While professional historians have also found such information beneficial, feminist scholars from other disciplines whose work engages such topics as the family, education, medical and social service institutions, and women's biography might also find such information of use. After all, although separated from the world by traditional monastic practices, cloister walls and habits, women religious have always been connected in various ways to the larger society. As Elizabeth Rapley notes,

They shared many of its customs and practices. They employed the same notaries, doctors, and legal advisors. They drank the same water and patronized the same butchers and grocers. They approached the problems of child rearing, nursed and medicated their sick, and attended the dying much the same way as "the world" did. In fact, the records they kept about these things, at a time when women as a whole seldom wrote much about daily life, can provide useful information on life not only in the cloister but also in the larger community that swirled around it only a stone wall away. (Rapley 2001, 4)

The annals, chapter minutes, newsletters, yearbooks, short fiction, membership records and obituaries preserved in convent archives offer much otherwise unattainable detail about this unique, homosocial culture and its intersections with the larger society.

Also of interest to certain feminist scholars might be the extensive photographic collections of some convent archives. Including formal group photographs, portraiture, and more candid photography, these collections are abundantly useful to historians of visual culture, as demonstrated in Colleen Skidmore's work on the 19th-century photography of the Grey Nuns in Québec (Skidmore 2002). Further, feminist scholars from other disciplines whose research on women and visual culture intersects with topics such as fashion and the body, might also find these collections of value.

As Elizabeth Smyth and Heidi MacDonald, both noted historians of women religious in English Canada, have demonstrated in their respective works, sisters hold a pivotal place in the history of educational, medical, and social service institutions across the nation.

Smyth's numerous publications on the subject of teaching sisters in Ontario (Smyth 1997; 1999; 2007), and MacDonald's research on the Sisters of St. Martha and the Sisters of Charity and their contributions to the social infrastructure of the Maritimes (MacDonald 2003a; 2003b; 2003c; 2004) are significant contributions to both women's history and the social history of Canada. Researchers from outside the field of women's history would be well advised to consider Smyth and MacDonald's works, and to note the integral connections between women religious and educational, health and social service institutions. Researchers engaged in feminist analysis of such Canadian institutions would be remiss to disregard convent records pertaining to their founding, development, staffing and management.

My own current research on Catholic girlhood indicates yet another direction for a feminist analysis engaging convents' archival material. In researching women's religious communities in English Canada in the 1950s and '60s, a period of significant reform in Roman Catholicism, I became intensely interested in sisters' self-perceptions preceding and during this period. Questions arose such as: how did individual sisters view their bodies, their gender, their public personas and their relationships to secular women? What were their deepest anxieties and their greatest joys in times of change? And, ultimately, how did this affect their communal process of reform? After conducting extensive oral history interviews, and while in the process of probing archives for information about the sisters, I came across some fascinating documents regarding the Ursuline sisters' ideas about girls and young women. Documents from meeting minutes and committee reports bearing such titles as "The Modern Girl" and "Girls Today"<sup>2</sup> were produced throughout the 1950s and '60s, revealing women's religious communities' perceptions of young women in the period.

As demonstrated by Mary Louise Adams, discourses produced by North American institutions in the postwar era served as "symbolic devices to underline the gravity of problems wrought by changes in the modern world and the need for ameliorative actions."

Adams argues that "references to 'children' and 'youth' were regularly employed by a whole range of social critics" and that "the collective progress of adolescents could indicate the shape society would take in the future; youth operated as a metaphor for the development of the society as a whole" (Adams 1997, 40). Taken in this interpretive light, these convent-produced discourses on girls and young women contribute to meaningful conjecture regarding the inner lives of women religious and the anxieties and concerns of their communities in the 1950s and 1960s. In fact, the issues which occupied sisters in the period, as reflected in their oral histories and other archival documents, are mirrored in their concerns regarding the girls in their schools and communities. A secondary outcome of this inquiry is that it also exposes and allows for the examination of a little-explored context in which girls and young women were constructed and discussed in postwar Canada. While my work on this topic is on-going, I believe it demonstrates the untapped potential of convent archives to move feminist scholars beyond traditional, historical applications of their sources.

A recent find at a local construction site has spurred on my interest in the aforementioned research project. During the recent demolition of an old convent, workers discovered a cache of artifacts in the convent walls. It seems that, in the early to mid-twentieth century, the girls in the convent boarding school had stashed notes, letters, valentines and other personal items behind the baseboards of the convent classrooms and dormitories (Boughner 2008). These items, though not yet catalogued and archived, may provide fascinating insights into the lives of girls in earlier centuries, and may contribute to a feminist understanding of girls' social lives, culture and communications.

### **Considerations, Caveats and Conclusions**

As Shelley Sweeney notes in "An Act of Faith: Access to Religious Records in English-Speaking Canada," the archives of religious institutions often house sensitive material, personal archival records which individuals and/or communities may not wish

disclosed (Sweeney 1990). Although communities are more open to researchers in recent decades than they were in the past, convent archives are private archives, and, like other private corporations, each respective community and its respective archivist have the right to refuse entry.

Also worthy of consideration is the fact that scholars pursuing twentieth- or twenty-first-century topics will often find themselves dealing with living subjects, or subjects who have close, emotional ties to their predecessors. The use of some archival materials, therefore, requires a heightened sensitivity to sisters and communities, and may raise particular ethical considerations.

The Canadian Religious Conference/Conférence religieuse canadienne (CRC), an umbrella organization of 230 religious communities, provides contact information for women's religious communities across Canada, as well as maintaining archival records of its own 55-year history. While some communities of women are especially welcoming of researchers, others are less so, and researchers must approach individual communities with their requests. The Association of Canadian Archivists (ACA) maintains a Religious Archives Special Interest Section (RASIS) comprised of various religious and archivists, which may also provide useful contacts for researchers.

The archives of women religious, in their breadth and depth of information regarding Canadian social institutions and women's lives, are worthy of consideration by feminist researchers across the disciplines. As access to these very significant resources continues to increase, feminist scholars will produce richer and more nuanced analyses of Canadian women's history, culture and experience.

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#### **Endnotes**

1. See, for example, Marguerite Jean, *Evolution des communautés religieuses de femmes au Canada de 1639 à nos jours* (Montréal: Fides 1977); Marie-Paule Malouin, *Ma soeur, à quelle école allez-vous? : deux écoles de filles à la fin du XIXe siècle* (Montréal: Fides, 1985). Micheline Dumont and Nadia Fahmy-Eid, eds, *Les couventines : l'éducation des filles au Québec dans les congrégations religieuses enseignantes, 1840-1960* (Montreal: Boreal, 1986); Micheline D'Allaire, *Les communautés religieuses et l'assistance social à Montreal 1659-1900* (Montreal: Editions du Meridien, 1997); Danielle Juteau and Nicole Laurin, *Un métier et un vocation. Le travail des religieuses au Québec de 1901 à 1971* (Montreal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montreal, 1997); Colleen Gray, *The Congregation de Notre-dame, Superiors, and the Paradox of Power, 1693-1796* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007).

2. Mother Kathleen's Report to the General Chapter, "Minutes of the 1957 General Chapter, Ursuline Sisters of the Chatham Union Archives, Chatham, Ontario"; Mother St. David's Opening Address to the 1969 General Chapter, "Minutes of the 1969 General Chapter, Ursuline Sisters of the Chatham Union Archives, Chatham, Ontario."

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**Additional Information:**

Association of Canadian Archivists – Religious Archives Special Interest Section  
[http://archivists.ca/special\\_interest/religious.aspx](http://archivists.ca/special_interest/religious.aspx)

Canadian Religious Conference/Conférence religieuse canadienne -  
[www.crc-canada.org/main.cfm](http://www.crc-canada.org/main.cfm)