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A Tribute to Margaret Conrad: Activist, Scholar, Feminist Pioneer

BONNIE HUSKINS, University of New Brunswick and St. Thomas University, is currently working on a manuscript with Michael Boudreau based on the diaries of working-class homemaker Ida Louise

Martin (*née* Friars) of Saint John, New Brunswick, who kept daily entries from 1945-92. She is also beginning a new project on sociability, family and community amongst the first and second-generation Loyalists in the Maritimes.

Abstract

One of several presentations on Margaret Conrad's work and career at the 2009 Atlantic Canada Studies Conference in Charlottetown, this paper describes how Conrad applied her feminism to the writing, teaching and dissemination of history, and in the process, transformed the ways in which historians approach their profession.

Résumé

Une des nombreuses présentations sur le travail et la carrière de Margaret Conrad à la Conférence Atlantic Canada Studies de 2009 à Charlottetown, cet article décrit comment Conrad a appliqué son féminisme dans ses oeuvres, son enseignement, et la dissémination de l'histoire, et de ce fait, a transformé les façons dont les historiennes approchent leur profession.

Margaret Conrad's research, publications and teaching have covered a diversity of historical topics over her forty years in the field. She has written political history, facilitated Planter studies and, in her most recent career at the University of New Brunswick (UNB), has led the way in humanities computing. In addition to these various contributions to academia, one of the continuities in her career has been her promotion of feminist praxis. One of several presentations on Conrad's work at the 2009 Atlantic Canada Studies Conference in Charlottetown, this paper describes how she applied her feminism to the writing, teaching and dissemination of history, and in the process, transformed the ways in which historians approach their profession.

Since the beginning of her career, Marg Conrad has been involved in various campaigns to elevate the status of women in Canadian society. One expression of this agenda was her involvement in the development of women's studies programs in the 1960s and '70s. Marg participated in an

early interdisciplinary women's studies course launched at Acadia University in 1973. Seven women and several men contributed to this evening course that attracted over 100 students the first night it met in September. She later taught a year-long course on "Women in Canadian History," as well as other women's studies courses. In the fall of 1974, Conrad, Donna Smyth and others formed a collective to plan for the launch of *Atlantis: A Women's Studies Journal*, which continues to publish today. Marg subsequently served as co-editor of *Atlantis* from 1977-85, and in 2000, she co-edited, with Linda Kealey, a special, 25th anniversary issue of the Journal entitled "Feminism and Canadian History." Marg also promoted women's studies in Canada by holding the Nancy's Chair in Women's Studies at Mount Saint Vincent University from 1996-98.

Marg Conrad's experiences at Acadia University made her keenly aware of the gender inequalities which exist within institutions of higher learning. In 1978 and again in 1990, she collaborated with university colleagues to produce reports on the status of women at Acadia University (Committee on the Status of Women at Acadia University 1978; Conrad and Looker 1990). The survey in 1990 revealed that female staff, students and faculty made up more than half of those associated with the university, but the institution, according to Conrad and her associates, was "anything but female dominated." Based on the data collected from separate questionnaires returned by staff, students and faculty members, the report asserted that discrimination and differential treatment based on gender still existed, and proceeded to make numerous recommendations to correct the situation. These recommendations included the establishment of a female equity officer; an equity committee; funds to attract and hire qualified women; daycare facilities; equity programs to reach women students; faculty assessment of their "texts, jokes and attitudes to ensure that they are not devaluing women"; more women in positions of authority; and many more - eighty-three recommendations in total.

Marg has done her best to meet the need for more women in positions of authority by taking on many leadership roles in the historical community. She has served on a number of national professional associations: the National Archives Board (1987-91); the Historical Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (1990-98); and on the Minister's Round Table on Parks Canada Secretariat (2001), to name just a few. Moreover, she was president of the Canadian Historical Association from 2005-07, and co-editor of the *Canadian Historical Review* from 1997-2000. Conrad currently sits on the Editorial Board of the journal *Acadiensis*; on the Board of Directors of Canada's National History Society; on the Scientific Advisory Committee of the Council of Canadian Academies; on the Advisory Board of the Lafontaine-Baldwin Symposium; and she chairs the External Committee of Experts on Commemorations for the National Capital Commission.

Marg Conrad has also worked tirelessly throughout her career to practise and promote a feminist approach to the writing and teaching of history. As a historiographer, she has kept us apprised of major developments within women's studies and women's history, but she has also acted as a fearless critic, prodding us to adopt an analytical approach which embraces female agency. Though not the first review of women's history in Canada, Conrad's 1983 review article entitled "The Re-Birth of Canada's Past: A Decade of Women's History" (Conrad 1983) provided readers with a sense of the excitement and promise of this new field when she articulated a shift in attitude toward women's history over the course of the decade. In the early years, women's historians encountered reactions ranging from indifference to outright hostility. But by the end of the decade, there was a more general acceptance of feminist scholarship predicated upon a "whole new angle of vision" (Pierson and Prentice 1982).

Marg also devoted nearly a page of the review to the new *L'Histoire des femmes au Québec* by the Clio Collective (Le Collectif Clio 1982), praising the book as a landmark study, but chastising the authors for neglecting minority women in Quebec and for

portraying women primarily as victims. In the same vein, Conrad complained that the contributors to *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s-1920s* (Kealey 1979), with one exception, conveyed a sense of disappointment and disapproval at the failure of maternal feminists to transform and transcend their limitations, whether discussing women's paid work, women's suffrage or social reform, a theme that Conrad would revisit in her own scholarship.

In "Keep It Complex: Feminist Pedagogies in a Post-Modernist, Post-Structuralist, Post-Colonialist, Post Feminist World" (Conrad 1995), Marg Conrad tackled the issues and challenges associated with using the classroom as a major site for feminist struggle. Here, she reminds readers that feminist pedagogy emerged in the early 1980s as a significant focal point for discussion and debate. She pointed out the challenges posed by post-modern critiques that call into question earlier assumptions that a feminist classroom ought to be nurturing, democratic, inclusive of experience and emotions and committed to change. Overall, she acknowledged that post-modern critiques of totalizing theory were useful, for they allow us "to incorporate the range of feminist voices from women and men of different races, classes, ages, cultures and abilities...".

Marg Conrad's interest in uncovering a diversity of "feminist voices" is revealed in the evolution of her research and scholarship. Her early work focused on questions of gender equity in public life. Her monograph on the career of Conservative politician George Nowlan (Conrad 1986a) reflected a longtime interest in political history, but after working with the memoirs of Ellen Fairclough, the first female federal cabinet minister and one of the first woman accountants in Canada (Fairclough 1995), Marg also became interested in the history of women in politics. This would lead her to deliver a paper on the history of women and political culture to a workshop on "Building Women's Leadership in Atlantic Canada" at Mount Saint Vincent University in December 2001; this paper would eventually be published as "Addressing the Democratic Deficit: Women and Political

Culture in Atlantic Canada" in a special 2003 edition of *Atlantis* (Conrad 2003b).

It should be noted, however, that Marg Conrad's work on Ellen Fairclough not only generated an interest in questions of female political representation, but also in the status of women in traditionally male-dominated professions, in this case accountancy. When accountancy began to professionalize, according to Conrad and collaborator Cyndy Allen, women were deliberately kept out of higher ranks and designated as lower-paid clerks and bookkeepers, until changes began to occur in the 1960s. Even then, the authors note, obstacles remained for women who wanted to qualify as chartered accountants or to become partners in a firm. Conrad and Allen used survey methods to evaluate contemporary perceptions of gender differences in opportunities for advancement in the field. Unsurprisingly from a 2009 perspective, their 1990s survey indicated the persistence of a glass ceiling for women in the profession of accountancy (Allen and Conrad 1999).

Conrad views her scholarship, not merely as an academic exercise or as an amusing diversion, but as an "act of political awakening" (Conrad 1984, 2). Thus, it is not surprising that she has challenged us to look at history in new and different ways. In 1984, Marg predicted that the study of women's culture would "transform not only how we study women historically but also how we 'do' history generally" (Conrad 1984, 2). By this period, she had enlarged her analytical framework to accommodate not only women's public lives, but also their now much-debated private sphere as well. This focus drew on American analyses of women's culture, produced by such historians as Nancy Cott and Carroll Smith Rosenberg (Cott 1977; Smith Rosenberg 1985). While some Canadian women's historians have suggested that this perspective had less sway in Canada, Conrad's work provides a caveat.

How might the study of women's culture be potentially transformative, according to Conrad? First of all, we must learn how to see history through the "female eye" (Conrad 1982, 2), reminiscent of the

aforementioned "whole new angle of vision." Historians must turn their focus from the public sphere to a consideration of the local, the personal, and the familial, for it is in these contexts that women would be encountered more regularly in the historical record. Marg is not espousing that we solely privilege the private sphere, but rather that we seek to understand the ways in which women's daily experiences intersect with "larger historical forces" (Conrad 1984, 4). She also insists that we must move beyond conventional public sources, if we wish to study women's culture. Thus began Conrad's abiding interest in the study of women's personal documents: their diaries, journals, correspondences, and memoirs. These sources, she argued, have frequently been dismissed as trivial and mundane: if we are to recover women's historical experiences and perceptions, we must treat such sources more seriously.

Marg Conrad teamed up with Toni Laidlaw and Donna Smyth in the early 1980s to form the Maritime Women's Archives Project, an initiative which aimed to collect women's diaries and other autobiographical sources. By the time they published *No Place Like Home*, a 1988 anthology containing excerpts from Nova Scotia women's diaries and correspondences, they had collected over 100 life stories (Conrad 1988, 1). Marg's interest in women's diaries also led her to analyze the lively interwar diary of Mary Dulhanty, a young woman enrolled in the Commercial program at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax in 1926-27. Conrad used the diary to write a paper on growing up in the interwar period in Nova Scotia, which was read before the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society in 1997, and published in the *Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society* in 1999 (Conrad 1999). Portions of Dulhanty's diary and a short introduction by Conrad and Janne Cleveland were also included in Kathryn Carter's 2002 anthology entitled *The Small Details of Life: Twenty Diaries by Women in Canada, 1830-1996* (Conrad and Cleveland 2002).

How should historians approach women's diaries and other personal accounts? In a 1982 Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women

(CRIAW) publication entitled *Recording Angels* (which was subsequently republished in *The Neglected Majority* (Prentice and Trofimenkoff 1985) and in a CRIAW reader on Canadian women's literary productions (Relke 1992)), Conrad boldly contended that sources such as women's diaries would "turn traditional history inside out. Instead of ordinary lives forming the backdrop of history, the so-called 'big' political events are reduced to rumours and abstractions while the daily rhythm of life continues to occupy the centre stage" (Conrad 1982, 2). In order to study women and their daily rhythms, Marg insisted that we need a "new vocabulary," for even such "fundamental concepts" as time and place "take on new meanings" amongst women in various historical contexts (Conrad 1988, 302). In a now classic piece entitled "'Sundays Always Make Me Think of Home': Time and Place in Canadian Women's History" (initially published in a volume of conference proceedings entitled *Not Just Pin Money* (Latham and Pazdro 1984) and reprinted in two editions of the ever-evolving women's history anthology: *Rethinking Canada: the Promise of Women's History* (Strong-Boag and Fellman 1986/1991)), Conrad explained that time for women was largely "reckoned through the prism of family," and that women's "life course decisions" such as their school attendance patterns, age at marriage, and workforce participation, were largely directed by "family expectations, long after most men began to make choices based on individual and economic considerations." Although Marg's work embraced the ideas of American scholars such as Tamara Hareven (Hareven 1982), her focus on women's time and family time was a pioneering development in Canadian historiography, for it encouraged us to consider other forms of time besides the chronologies defined by male experience.

Place, for most women, according to Conrad, was represented by "home, kin and community, spaces in which women's roles were clearly defined and largely valued." The latter point is a significant one: Conrad was (and still is) urging us to look beyond the feminist critiques of domesticity as a form of oppression and domination (although she did

not deny that it could be experienced this way). As previously noted, Marg expressed concern that much of the feminist scholarship in Canada focused on women as victims. She gravitated toward American works on women's culture which emphasized the positive agency exhibited by middle-class women who formed associations, networks and friendships. Similarly, she encouraged us to see the home and hearth as many women of the 18th and 19th centuries saw it: as a source of comfort and support in times of change and transformation (Conrad 1984, 1-14). For such women, there really was "no place like home."

Marg Conrad's enthusiasm for women's diaries may be explained not only by their tremendous potential as expressions of female voice and female experience, but also by a personal connection, namely the diary-writing careers of her grandmother Laura Kaulback Slauenwhite (whose Depression-era diary appears in *No Place Like Home*), and her mother, who has kept a diary since the 1960s. According to Conrad, her mother used to read portions of her diary to her father when he began to suffer from Alzheimer disease, an example of how the personal diary can "stretch" to "meet the needs" of the writer and her audience (Cooper 1987, 91, 96). Conrad herself kept a diary in the 1950s, a five-year diary with a plastic cover that sported a stylized image of a girl with a ponytail. She admits that she has not had the courage to read it and may indeed destroy it. She often wishes that she had kept a diary "through the days when we were working so hard on *Atlantis* and fighting various good fights at Acadia," but admits she did not have the discipline to keep a daily record (email conversation between Margaret Conrad and Bonnie Huskins, 26 April 2009). In any case, Marg's enthusiasm for women's personal texts has encouraged many colleagues and graduate students to follow in her footsteps with their own diary projects. Indeed, she has been a source of support and inspiration for this author's current project on the diaries of Ida Louise Martin (*née* Friars), a working-class homemaker from Saint John (New Brunswick), who kept daily entries from 1945-92 (Huskins and Boudreau 2005).

Encouraging colleagues and graduate students is part of Marg Conrad's larger enthusiasm for knowledge mobilization and dissemination, which she views as an important part of her professional responsibilities as an historian. Conrad has created numerous opportunities for others to study the experiences of women in historical context, for example her promotion of the Planters studies conferences and essay collections, where various works on women have appeared. Most notable is the volume *Intimate Relations: Family and Community in Planter Nova Scotia* (Conrad 1995), which contains historiographical pieces on family history by Philip Greven Jr., Bettina Bradbury, and Ann Gorman Condon, as well as a diverse range of works on Planter women, such as Gwendolyn Davies' "Gendered Responses: The Seccombe Diaries," Elizabeth Mancke's "At the Counter of the General Store: Women and the Economy in Eighteenth-Century Horton, Nova Scotia," and Judith Norton's "The Dark Side of Planter Life: Reported Cases of Domestic Violence."

Marg Conrad also actively promotes women's history amongst undergraduate students. The Canadian history texts penned by herself and Alvin Finkel - both volumes of the *History of the Canadian Peoples* series (Conrad and Finkel 2009, vols. 1 & 2), *Canada: A National History* (Conrad and Finkel 2007), and the anthologies *Foundations* (Conrad and Finkel, 2008) and *Nation and Society* (Conrad and Finkel 2008) - have done more to gender Canadian history than any of the survey texts currently available. Moreover, Conrad does not stop at the boundaries of academia: much of her work as a Canada Research Chair at UNB has involved providing public access to women's history by mounting various collections of primary documents on the web. As part of the Atlantic Canada Portal initiative, Conrad and her team have created a virtual archives, featuring a number of collections which highlight the experiences of women in various historical contexts. Relevant sites include Loyalist Women in New Brunswick; the personal and family correspondences of Loyalist patriarch Edward Winslow; the letters of a farming family, the MacQueens, from

Pictou County, Nova Scotia; and the newest collection, a series of ten letters written by John and Helen MacDonald, residents of Prince Edward Island, between 1779 and 1801.

From her early days at Acadia University to her tenure as a Canadian Research Chair at UNB, Marg Conrad has been a prominent leader and feminist pioneer in the field of Canadian history. Reflecting on the trajectory of her career, she remarked in 2003: "On a personal level, I can say that being part of a movement enriched my life as a historian. There are few greater academic satisfactions than being involved in developing a new field of inquiry, especially one that echoes so loudly in public life" (Forum 2003). Indeed, Marg has been instrumental in determining the direction of women's history and women's studies "as a new field of inquiry" in Canada. As a feminist and public historian, she has also encouraged us to use our scholarship and teaching to create a better world for women and for all Canadians, so that our contributions will continue to echo loudly in public life. In that sense, Marg Conrad has changed the way we "do" history!

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Conrad, the Textbook Writer

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