

# Feminism and the Making of Canada: Historical Reflections/Le féminisme et le façonnement du Canada: Réflexions sur l'histoire

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Although the Canadian Historical Association (CHA) provides one venue for feminist historians to meet and discuss their work, there is also immense benefit in sponsoring separate conferences and workshops to discuss women's and gender history, particularly because this offers a chance to make transdisciplinary connections, and it allows us more time to reflect and discuss. Separate conferences, such as the one entitled "Feminism and the Making of Canada: Historical Reflections/Le féminisme et le façonnement du Canada: Réflexions sur l'histoire," held in Montréal, May 7-9 2004, can also make a strong effort to draw feminist scholars from the West and East, regions sometimes marginalized by the academic dominance of central Canada. Because there had not been such a meeting since the conference "Teaching Women's History," held at Trent University in 1993, professors and students from Trent, McGill and Université du Québec à Montréal collaborated to sponsor the conference in Montréal. Another decade of scholarship has clearly left an imprint on the writing of women's and gender history, as scholars are stressing new themes and employing new conceptual tools, though interestingly, some of the same preoccupations and dilemmas remain front and centre as they did in 1993.

The Montréal conference was intended to open up a space for reflective, critical and engaged papers which explored how gender history has evolved in Canada, and why. (Although one comparative paper by Erin Stewart Eves examined Aboriginal history in Canada

and Australia, most presentations dealt primarily with Canada). Between 1993 and 2004, one difference in the programs was the increasing participation of scholars from across disciplines, and from interdisciplinary perspectives. Papers came from sociologists, historians, legal scholars, cultural studies professors, and also from those now trained in Women's Studies as its own scholarly area. Because of the importance of feminist theory to gender history - feminist theory being interdisciplinary by its very nature - women's history has always welcomed, utilized and benefitted from such dialogue.

Certainly, differences in approach often remain, and were evident in the papers, but these can be a source of intellectual growth through productive discussions of our differences. The interdisciplinary exchange, particularly with reference to discussions about the influence of feminist and social theories on our work, could become even stronger, and we hope that this is something that future conference organizers will build on.

While there were fewer overviews of feminist history writing and historiography in Canada than we expected after thirty years of intensive output, many papers delved into particular themes and topics that continue to preoccupy researchers in Canada. There was a strong emphasis on cultural topics, which have remained a constant theme in Canadian women's history, though new areas of research are clearly emerging: papers explored many issues relating to representation, ranging from historical heroines to feminist theatre, photographic images as political messages, and feminist artists' re-imagining of that stolid Canadian symbol, the Beaver. Wrestling with the complex history of the family has also been an ongoing preoccupation of feminist scholars, and it inspired an interesting session in which Nancy Christie explored the notion of "private" resistance within the nineteenth century family and Katrina Srigley asked questions about

"race" and the family.

There is also an extensive feminist scholarship on methods of doing history, and how these are shaped by, and in turn shape, the history we write. A dynamic session on war and peace underscored this as scholars working with oral history discussed the process of their research as well as the research itself, offering a dialectical analysis of the two. Biography, again, is conceived of as a "traditional" historical method, but feminists have also tried to use it to secure a window into a certain historical era, understand unusual or distinctive women who stood apart from their times, or explore key themes in feminist history. Scholars are also returning to "notable" women, not as hagiography, but rather are asking new questions about their role in imperialist or nationalist ideologies. Questions about "what is feminist biography" were posed by Liz Kirkland, and Peter Campbell's discussion of the enigmatic but fascinating socialist-feminist Rose Henderson occasioned an interesting audience discussion as Tamara Myers pointed out that his tolerant, radical socialist Rose Henderson was not her Probation Officer, judgmental and punitive Rose Henderson. How can we piece together these very different versions of the same biography?

Not surprisingly, how we analyze feminist movements continues to be an issue of contention. Papers re-examining both first and second wave feminism (and also one by Cheryl Anne Gosselin on Québec women's movements which thankfully disputed the "wave" characterization of Canadian feminism) offered a chance to do this. Clearly, since the 1993 conference, critical race theory has had an increasingly important and productive impact on our thinking as discussions surrounding the papers by Mary Jo Nadeau and Sarita Srivastava on the National Action Committee, and Nancy Forestell on suffrage-era feminism, demonstrated.

Finally, how we convey our knowledge to

others, both our students, and the wider public, was also a theme of discussion. Kate McKenna's discussion of historic sites and the potential to include women's lives in them, raised this issue directly, as did some of the papers dealing with representation and culture. A lively session on teaching, with considerable audience discussion, also reminded us how much of our lives are taken up with questions of communication of our research and writing, not just to our colleagues, but to our students. A host of questions were raised ranging from how to deal with the bilingual classroom, how to teach American women's history in French despite a lack of French-language texts to how "race" and racism impacts not just our intellectual work but the classroom dynamics. Last but not least, Penny Wheelright's presentation of her film "The Orkney Lad" reminded us that women's history can be translated into more popular forms that maintain historical integrity, while also reaching a wider audience.

A useful summing up by Mary Anne Poutanen and Andrée Lévesque also reminded us of what was absent, what we might stress better in the future. While we expected more critical engagements with the "nation," many papers took the nation for granted, and as Lévesque pointed out, sometimes that was the English-Canadian nation. Lévesque also noted that, with a few important exceptions, class was a neglected "category of analysis," and it was notable that few papers dealt directly with issues of labour. Poutanen also drew our attention to the paucity of work outside the twentieth century. With the exception of papers by Carolyn Podruchny, Colleen Gray and Nancy Christie conference papers did not deal with pre-industrial Canada.

It also struck us that although the conference was organized as a forum to discuss women's and gender history, masculinity was not particularly foregrounded in most of the papers. This was interesting but may not entirely reflect the range of scholarship

currently being undertaken. A second observation concerns the integration of theory and place. The importation of international theoretical constructs without attention to the nuances and context of the particular political state of Canada sometimes happens at the cost of exploring the distinct and overlapping Canadian nations, whether English-Canadian, Québécois or First Nations. While international English-language scholars of gender tend to ignore the power and significance of language, this insight is a potentially important contribution Canadian scholars can add to the international literature.

The Montréal conference furthered the ongoing conversation around Canadian women's history which took off thirty years ago, and continues to inspire students and teachers alike. It also made it clear that this debate must continue and scholars of Canadian women's and gender history are in need of more regular forums to debate, to exchange and to focus on related issues.

What follows are longer versions of two of the papers presented at the conference. Nancy Forestell's "Mrs. Canada Goes Global: Canadian First Wave Feminism Revisited" scrutinizes the historical writing on "first-wave" feminism in Canada in light of recent theoretical innovations and an exciting international historiography. She argues that any examination of turn-of-the-twentieth-century feminism must place Canada, and Canadian women, in a global context. Such a re-examination must both recognize and interrogate the importance of citizenship, imperialism, and internationalism. Differences structured by region and religion, two categories that have long been key to the writing of Canadian women's history, also need to be highlighted and analysed. Katherine McKenna's article in this issue also calls for a rethinking of our past, but in a different milieu. She argues that thirty years of women's history have had relatively little impact on the way in which the numerous historic sites across Ontario

are interpreted. At a time when "public history" is assuming an ever-greater place in history departments across the country, we need to ensure that the history "consumed" by the public incorporates the insights, analyses, and organizing principles developed by professional historians. Attention to the ways in which both women and gender shaped Ontario's past would help to produce more accurate and more inclusive narratives to be recounted to the tourists and school-groups who visit the province's historic sites.