

[Igartua on Boutilier and Prentice, 'Creating Historical Memory: English-Canadian Women and the Work of History'](#)

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Beverly Boutilier, Alison Prentice, eds. *Creating Historical Memory: English-Canadian Women and the Work of History*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997. xii + 308pp. \$75.00 CDN (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7748-0640-4.

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Historian foremothers, mothers, and sisters

Women in English Canada have been writing history for a long time, even though their male colleagues have in the past been reluctant to acknowledge, let alone encourage, the work of women historians. This collection of essays on English-Canadian women historians from the nineteenth century to the 1970s recounts the personal stories of half a dozen English-Canadian women who chose to become practitioners of history. These stories are framed by chapters on local history in the Ontario Women's Institutes, on the women historians in Catholic religious orders, on the long 'siege' of English Canada's history departments by women as students and as prospective faculty, and on the birth of women's history in Canadian history departments in the 1970s. It offers a fascinating journey into the personal and professional lives of successive generations of Canadian women who made history their avocation or their vocation. It is at once a collective work of solid scholarship and a delight to read, at least for the wealthy who can afford the price or the lucky who can borrow it from their library!

The book is organized in four sections. The first, entitled "Community Building", presents the work of women historians who practiced their craft in order to create historical memory within Canadian communities. The second section, "Transitions", presents the work of women during what may be called the "proto-professional" phase of historical writing by women in English Canada. The first chapter of this section recounts the work of women religious who constructed and preserved the historical memories of their orders, who wrote history for their students and who wrote also for the scholarly community. This is followed by the stories of two exceptional women: Constance Lindsay Skinner, who lived from her pen and her knowledge of the north, a female predecessor of Pierre Berton without the financial successes; and Isabel Murphy, the wife of Oscar Skelton, the Queen's University political scientist and historian who became Canada's "leading civil servant of his time." [1] Both Skinner and Skelton were accomplished historians and writers who worked outside the framework of the burgeoning male profession of historians.

The third section deals with "The Academy" The opening chapter by Allison Prentice, entitled "Laying Siege to the History Professoriate," outlines the important presence of women students in History programs in English Canada prior to the 1950s, illustrates the persistent definition of "historian" as a male profession, and sketches the few women who were hired as faculty during that period. Esther Clark Wright, the historian of the New Brunswick Loyalists, and Kathleen Wood-Legh, the Ontario-

born Cambridge medievalist who was blind, are the subjects of the next two chapters, which, like the biographical articles on Skinner and Skelton, skillfully weave the personal and professional aspects of these women's lives.

In the last section, which contains only one chapter, Deborah Gorham recalls the birth of women's history in English-Canadian History departments in the 1970s. Natalie Zemon Davis and Jill Ker Conway were the initiators of women's history courses at the august University of Toronto, while Gorham, then an untenured young scholar, did the same at a college of Carleton University, in Ottawa. Mary Kinnear at the University of Manitoba, Alison Prentice at York University, and Ruth Roach Pierson at Memorial University of Newfoundland, among others, also launched women's history courses in their institutions. These young women scholars were energetic both in teaching and in research: Canadian women's history became the topic of an increasing number of sessions at the Canadian Historical Association (CHA) annual meetings, and scholars engaged in women's history founded the Canadian Committee on Women's History in 1975. This committee has had a significant impact not only on scholarship, but on the composition and direction of the Canadian Historical Association as well: of the last ten CHA presidents, four have been women.[2]

The book's introduction by Boutilier and Prentice explains the editors' objective to have the contributions of women to modern historiography and historical practice recognized. These contributions have taken many forms and have arisen out of varied "institutional and intellectual locations" (p. 4), recently within the academy, but earlier essentially without. In considering historical production outside the academy, Boutilier and Prentice also challenge the "amateur/professional dichotomy as applied to the term "historian" (p. 4). In their view, as history became a profession in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, its male members endowed it with a masculine and "scientific" character and characterized the work of women historians as amateurish antiquarianism. Thus scientific history was defined as men's work, and women historians were dismissed as amateurs. There is much to this argument, but by questioning wholesale the relevance of the amateur/professional dichotomy because of its gender implications rather than arguing for the removal of the gender implications, the argument would also equate bad history written by men with good history written by women. That would hardly seem the editors' purpose, as the organizing principle of the work, from community building to entering the academy, obviously views entering the academy as an improvement in the lot of women historians.

The introduction also alludes (p. 8) to an "emerging consensus" that the history of women's historical writing follows different forms and a different periodization than male writing. It is an interesting historiographical argument which unfortunately is not developed more fully in the book, which modestly presents itself as "a beginning for this kind of work in English Canada" (p. 9).

The introduction is silent on three points concerning the scope of the book. The most crucial one is the definition of "English-Canadian". The term is defined simply as "women who worked in English" (p. 9) and who also, the reader assumes, either were born in Canada or spent their "career" here, like Sarah Anne Curzon, who created the Canadian heroine Laura Secord. This allows the editors to include biographical articles on Constance Skinner, who spent most of her professional career and published mainly in the United States, and Kathleen Wood-Legh, who went to England for her postgraduate work after an undergraduate degree and an M.A. at McGill, whose career was spent in England, and whose writings contain "few hints of [her] Canadian origins" (p. 262). While the reader

is thankful for having learned of the fascinating careers of these two women, one can't help but suggest that "English-Canadian" is as socially constructed a category as "woman" or "historian" and that it deserves the same kind of analytical examination. In other words, what is the book arguing about the "Canadianness" of these women and of their historical writings?

The second point is related to the first and has to do with language. By focusing on English-Canadian women historians, and by completely ignoring French-speaking women historians, the book is implicitly arguing that the historiographical paths of English-Canadian and French-Canadian women historians bore no relation one to the other. The book's scholarly and intellectual references are to Britain and the United States; I have not seen, either in the introduction or in Deborah Gorham's chapter on the emergence of women's history in the 1970s, any mention of the work of French-speaking women historians, whether French or Canadian. Like national affiliation, language is more than a straightforward category: among scholars, it opens up, or restricts, intellectual affinities. While one can understand the need to create the historical memory of foremothers in the profession, one would have appreciated some attempt at comparative historiographical work. For example, the importance of religion in the intellectual make-up and historical writings of Agnes Maule Machar, of the Catholic sisters who wrote the history of their congregation and texts for their students, would bear comparing with the work of early male clerical historical writers of French Canada.[3]

The third point concerning the scope of the book has to do with generation. There is now a generation of young women historians of Canada, of which Boutilier is a member, who would have deserved presentation in this book. A prosopographical view of this younger generation would help in understanding how women historians' entry into the academy has evolved in Canada since the 1970s; what, for example, has been the effect of the shrinking academic market on the career choices of women interested in history? How do members of the younger generation view their role as women scholars?

These issues having been raised, let's return to the meat of the book. All of the essays are worth reading for their intrinsic interest, for their scholarly quality, and for the pleasure of reading well-written history. The first section of the book celebrates the historical memory of women pioneer historians. The article on Agnes Maule Machar traces the career and intellectual orientation of Canada's first historical writer, an ardent and prolific apostle of Canada and the British Empire in the classical late-nineteenth-century tradition. Like Machar, Sarah Anne Curzon saw herself employed in the work of nation-building, by glorifying the British Empire and Loyalist heroes and heroines, but also in "redefining the parameters of female citizenship," in the words of Beverly Boutilier (p. 52). The next chapter traces the long arc of the history of Ontario's Women's Institutes, rural women's organizations devoted in part to the preservation and celebration of local history, with its emphasis on everyday life. Their work was typified by the Tweedsmuir Books of the 1940s and 1950s, submitted to a national competition for local history named in honour of a former Governor General of Canada whose wife had been active in the Women's Institute movement in Great Britain and Canada. The celebratory tone and uneven scholarly apparatus of the Tweedsmuir books sometimes irritated Canadian professional historians, but others encouraged and recognized local history with CHA awards of merit.

The second section of the book, entitled "Transitions", opens with an account of the historians in three female religious orders in Ontario. Their first task was to keep their congregation's archives

and write its "corporate" history. Those annals are said to "shed insight into the construction of gender", an intriguing idea worth pursuing. The nuns (has this term become derogatory? It is never used in this chapter) also wrote textbooks for Catholic pupils and college students and participated in the work of the Canadian Catholic Historical Association, created in 1933. Their historical work thus spanned the range from the "amateur" to the "professional", and in this latter capacity they sometimes exercised their critical faculties on male-produced primary sources (p.121).

The two chapters which follow are the most captivating of the book. Jean Barman's poignant biography of Constance Lindsay Skinner, a historian of the Canadian North who published both "scholarly" and "popular" works and who lived, mostly in straitened circumstances, from her pen, shows how Skinner's personal and professional life were deeply entwined. She was a resolutely independent woman who put her writing career before family and personal comfort. Her platonic attraction to Canadian Arctic explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson was one element in a "trio of personal dilemmas, unrequited love, a smothering mother, and ill health" (p. 157). She made the history of the Western Canadian fur trade popular in the United States years before Pierre Berton made similar topics the subject of popular history in Canada.

Unlike Constance Skinner, Isabel Skelton made the duties of wife and family come before a career as historian. Terry Crowley's sensitive portrayal of the Queen's University-educated student, who earned an M.A. degree and the medal for History in 1901, skillfully fits the personal aspects of Isabel Skelton's life into an examination of her intellectual and scholarly development. Skelton began her writing career in literary criticism; her time as mother and wife left few hours for archival research. But she also wrote on the women's suffrage movement in Canada, blending economic and cultural explanations for its limited successes. She was a catholic historian, and "gender differences, ethnicity, social class, religion, and literature figured prominently in her work." (p. 190). She devoted her first historical writings to women's history from the French Regime to Confederation, in what had originally been conceived by the publisher as a companion volume to the Makers of Canada series.[4] She also wrote a life of Canadian nationalist D'Arcy McGee as well as of missionaries Isaac Jogues and Jean de Brébeuf. Crowley's account of Skelton's career is also a contribution to the history of scholarly publishing in Canada in the 1920s.

Besides Alison Prentice's analysis of women students and faculty in the pre-1950 period, the third part of the book contains two biographical sketches. Esther Clark Wright, the historian of the Maritime Loyalists, is the subject of the first one. Graduating with an honours degree in economics from Acadia, Esther Clark went on to graduate work in sociology at Toronto, where she became interested in the social history of New Brunswick. She then spent a year at Oxford and returned to Canada to qualify as a teacher after considering social work. She married an English physicist turned social scientist, whose graduate training and career she had to manage. She followed her husband for his graduate work in California, got him into Harvard, where she finished a Ph.D. in economics before he did, while keeping house for the both of them. She settled into a historian's career in New Brunswick, about which, unfortunately, we learn little in this chapter, which only traces her personal life to the early 1930s.

This last section is a little thin. The biographical sketch of Kathleen Wood-Legh, the Cambridge medievalist, fits awkwardly into the work. On the one hand, it illustrates the obstacles women historians of the first half of the twentieth century had to face when determined to pursue an

academic career. But on the other, it offers no material on the contributions of English-Canadian women to Canadian historiography. This section could have benefited from pieces on Irene Spry and Mary Quayle Innis, two Canadian economic historians of note.

This collective work is at once a work of celebration, creating the historical memory of important women historians in Canada, and an innovative work of historiography, which pays careful attention to the personal, the social, the economic, the institutional, and the religious components of women historians' lives. It offers a stimulating model for those who would do historiography right.

NOTES

[1]. Norman Hillmer, "Oscar Douglas Skelton," *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1985), vol. III, p. 1702.

[2]. See the list of CHA presidents at <http://www.yorku.ca/research/cha/html/english/pastprese.html>.

[3]. See Serge Gagnon, *Le Quebec et ses historiens de 1840 a 1920: la Nouvelle-France de Garneau a Groulx*. Sainte-Foy, Quebec: Presses de l'Universite Laval, 1978.

[4]. Isabel Skelton, *The Backwoodswoman: A Chronicle of Pioneer Home Life in Upper and Lower Canada*. Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1924.

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