

# The Origins of Women's History at the Université de Moncton

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lost enrollments precipitously. That's the spectre that haunts my planning.

Finally, a word about graduate teaching. Expressions of interest in graduate fields in gender history continue to be frequent among applicants to our graduate program. Gender history is one of our department's thematic fields, renamed from women's history. As I teach the field, it includes literature that might be categorized as either or both women's and gender history. I've very much enjoyed working with students in that field area. Of the nine M.A. theses in history that students have completed under my supervision, four have been in substantial measure women's history or gender history. All but one of the nine have made gender analysis part of their research strategy and have integrated it as an element in their work. In graduate teaching, then, my students are taking a mix of the specialist or integrative approaches to the place of women's history in History. As a result of the scholarly and political work of feminist women historians before me, at Dalhousie and elsewhere, it is now necessary for history students, graduate or undergraduate, whose intellectual interests are about power and justice, to know about women and to think about gender.

SHIRLEY TILLOTSON

### The Origins of Women's History at the Université de Moncton

I WOULD FIRST LIKE TO THANK THE organizers of the symposium for the invitation to participate in this roundtable. My understanding of the task I have been assigned is that I have the responsibility of representing the accomplishments and assessing the gaps in the teaching of women's history at my own institution, the Université de Moncton, and providing some indication of the potential for the future of the practice of women's history at this same institution.

I will begin by stating that the gaps have, so far, outweighed the accomplishments (this, I fear, will be a common assessment at this afternoon's roundtable) and I will attempt to provide some context for this assessment.

The Université de Moncton is a French-language institution within the English-speaking academic milieu of the Atlantic Provinces and, as such, it has always suffered from intellectual isolation. After all, communication through language – both oral and written – is, for academic institutions, fundamental to its mandate and academics have not managed, generally speaking, to overcome the language barrier that would allow greater communication regarding their research and their institution's programs and, more importantly, greater collaboration in these areas.

The Université de Moncton is not solely responsible for this state of affairs. However, its institutional mentality encouraged – and indeed still encourages – this isolation in a number of ways. After all, its *raison d'être* within the academic milieu of the Atlantic Provinces is unique: the post-secondary education of Acadians in the French language. The minority status of Acadians within the Atlantic region, which bred a policy of cultural isolation in order to achieve cultural survival, has had great influence on this institution and its predecessor, the Université Saint-Joseph, throughout the 20th century. This is hardly surprising, since the elites responsible for

the development and implementation of this policy of cultural isolation were also, historically, those learned leaders who directed the Université Saint-Joseph's and later the Université de Moncton's institutional development.

The result – at least at the institutional level – is a siege mentality which has unwittingly ensured the continued mutual ignorance of the work accomplished by academics and students alike within the academic milieu of the Atlantic Provinces, and unwillingness to actively encourage intellectual collaboration between academics and academic institutions within the region.

Moreover, my institution has been “brought up” so to speak, in a conservative, intellectual mindset much influenced by the Catholic clergy – represented by both men and women – who were responsible for modernizing the institution in the 1960s and whose mindset, among other things, encouraged early specialization as well as discipline-based research and teaching while resisting efforts aimed at modernizing its curriculum and widening its fields of recognized research. If you will permit a personal anecdote as an example, between 1978, the year I left this institution to undertake my Ph.D., and 1990, the year I returned to the Université de Moncton as Associate Professor of History, the History Department's curriculum had not changed substantially; the honour's students were still required to specialize in North American history, and the curriculum showed a total absence of methodological considerations as a basis for understanding the discipline of history and undertaking historical research. This meant that the teaching of history trailed in the process of modernization of the discipline which was occurring elsewhere. In particular, the institution (and indeed, the department) has been very slow in encouraging and supporting a multidisciplinary approach to both teaching and research. The university still does not have a program in Acadian studies or in women's studies or even in Canadian/Maritime studies, within which History could sit, widen its scope and influence the development of human and social sciences. Indeed, the Department of History represents a mindset which is still suspicious of research and teaching within a multidisciplinary approach or structure.

On the other hand, the university's Chair in Acadian Studies is approximately thirty years old and the institution has recently established a research chair dealing with Canadian linguistic minorities – signs that the strategies promoting multidisciplinary research in the humanities and social sciences are, slowly but surely, being reassessed at the institutional level.

One should not assume, however, that the establishment of chairs and research institutes has had a direct impact on the teaching of the discipline of history nor on the teaching – or research – of women's history. Certainly, women's history and, by extension, women's studies have not made the short list on the university's published list of research priorities. Rather, women's studies and women's history have been left to the individual, to the research chair, to the professor and to the researcher to develop or not, as he or she sees fit. Perhaps one could best assess this as a perverted consequence of the concept of academic freedom. Perhaps one could also conclude that institutions remain as ignorant of the development of women's history as they were during the 1970s or, at the very least, that they see no need to encourage it or structure research and teaching around it.

Thankfully, at my institution, women's issues are at least being researched by individuals; the curriculum, which reflects here the research interests of individual

academics, is also being brought up to date. A few examples will suffice to illustrate this development. The History Department's curriculum – radically modified during the mid-1990s – has integrated not only an advanced thematic course in women's history (its themes, historical periods and laboratoires defined by the individual professor), but its research seminars – both undergraduate and graduate – are often used as a forum to further explore historiography and methodological issues relating to women. The result is that students have been trained in fundamental research on such themes as elites, power structures, discourse and cultural behaviours among women and in regards to women.

One positive result is that research undertaken by students in research seminars, honours research papers and masters theses now reflect this interest in women's history. It is redundant within the group of researchers and graduate students present here today to point out that one of the important roles we play as academics within our respective universities is the role of advisors or encadreurs to the research undertaken by our students. The close relationship one establishes between our own research interests and the training of graduate and undergraduate students in our discipline is a given.

To support this statement, I took a quick look at my own department's accomplishments in this sphere, and would like to share the results. At the undergraduate level, between 1978 and 2002, there were seven undergraduate honours papers (of a total of thirty-nine) dealing with women. Of these, five dealt with the colonial (17th and 18th century) periods and only two with the 20th century; only one dealt specifically with gender issues (gendered discourse), while five others dealt with women's role/choices/strategies within the social, economic or cultural contexts and one with representation of women within the media. Acadia was the chosen laboratoire for five of the seven undergraduate papers.

At the masters level, only three theses in history since 1972 (the earliest defended in 1990) have dealt with women (out of a total of thirty-six theses). All three dealt with women's role within society (women and business, women religious and the issue of modernity applied to the administration of hospitals and women and work in the industrial, urban context); two of these theses dealt with the 20th century, the other with the French colonial period. None of these theses dealt exclusively with the Acadian context; Louisbourg and Moncton constituted the chosen laboratoires.

Individual research projects undertaken by historians at the Université de Moncton constitutes another tool that allows us to measure the growing influence of women's history within the discipline. Obviously, these projects are defined by personal researchers' interests and, just as obviously, they have an impact not only on historiography but also on the curriculum. Among the ten historians working at the three campuses of the Université de Moncton, six are Canadianists and all of these include either among their work or define their main field as Acadian history. Jacques Paul Couturier has contributed to the history of Canadian and Acadian women through his two textbooks: *L'Expérience canadienne, des débuts à nos jours* and *Un passé composé. Le Canada de 1850 à nos jours*. His influence in establishing women as integral to students' understanding of Canada's past extends even beyond the textbook, since he was instrumental in defining the curriculum of the New Brunswick Department of Education's Grade 11 (now Grade 12) required course in Canadian history which served as a basis for the content of his *L'Expérience canadienne*. More

recently, Dr. Couturier repeated his partnership with the Department of Education in defining the concepts which will serve as the basis for New Brunswick's French language history program in world history, the proposed new Grade 11 history course.

Colonialist Maurice Basque, Chair in Acadian Studies at the Université de Moncton, has taught Acadian women's history as an extension of his interests in elites and other power structures, and has co-directed a number of both graduate and undergraduate theses in this area as well as co-editing a recent book on women's history titled *L'Acadie au féminin. Un regard multidisciplinaire sur les Acadiennes et les Cadiennes*. Nicole Lang and Nicolas Landry's 2001 publication of *Histoire de l'Acadie* sought to integrate women in a modern synthesis of Acadian history. Dr. Lang continues to pursue her interest in women's history through her teaching and research on women and work. I myself have been active in directing students' research in the field of women's history, teaching research seminars on gender at both graduate and undergraduate levels, and contributing by my own research to the area of women's writing.<sup>1</sup> Among the non-Canadianists within the discipline of history at the Université de Moncton, Joceline Chabot (contemporary France) studies the role of women within Catholic trade unions and Daniel Hickey (modern France) has directed theses and honours papers on women and health and women and work.

These examples are not intended to flatter myself or my colleagues in regard to our liberal, progressive views of history; rather, like historians elsewhere, historians at the Université de Moncton have grasped the fact that the integration of women within the teaching of their respective fields of history is a necessity as well as their responsibility as professors of history.

As for the future: the question is, of course, have we done enough? Are our individual and collective efforts sufficient to convince ourselves that women's history is faring well within our respective institutions – that students' understanding of the past now includes, as a matter of fact, that half of the population otherwise struck dumb by yesterday's definition of what constitutes "real" history? Is the process of integration of women as subjects and agents of history into our history curriculum enough? Personally, I think not. I perceive that students – particularly at the undergraduate level – see our interest in women's history as yet another fad, one of the popular-for-the-moment approaches to the teaching of history. More importantly, I sense their impatience with the subject, since women have after all – at least in the West – "won" their emancipation and achieved equality with men. Or so they believe. Thus, I find it almost impossible to discuss women's history with most students without coming to this uncomfortable place where I feel that I have failed to show the relevance of what I am presenting and discussing in class. Unlike teaching about wars, imperialism, Aboriginal or political history, and even social history, to name but a few, women's issues seem dépassés to my students, since they perceive the battles to have been won. Women's historians have themselves supplied the proof of these

1 See Monique Hébert, Nathalie Kermaol and Phyllis LeBlanc, eds., *Entre le quotidien et le politique: facettes de l'histoire des femmes francophones en milieu minoritaire*, Gloucester, RNAÉF, 1997 and M. Basque, I. McKee-Allain, L. Cardinal, P.E. LeBlanc and J. L. Pallister, eds., *L'Acadie au féminin. Un regard multidisciplinaire sur les Acadiennes et les Cadiennes*, Chaire d'études acadiennes, Université de Moncton, 2000. See also P.E. LeBlanc, *Les femmes et leur plume. Expériences de vie et récits personnels des femmes acadiennes*, forthcoming

victories; they're in our textbooks and they are expressed with pride in our teaching of women's history. It should come as no surprise, then, to sense this resistance among students of both sexes to the challenge posed by presenting the concept of gender as an analytical tool and understanding its influence on mentality, as well as its persistence and pervasiveness within power and social structures.

One method I've adopted in response to this resistance is to use women themselves to illustrate other themes or concepts as a basis for teaching history, rather than advertising or labelling my teaching as women's history. A case in point will clarify my meaning. I'm involved in teaching history within a special first-year undergraduate programme, within the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, titled "L'Odysée humaine" or "The Human Odyssey". The basic idea of this program is to provide an integrated curriculum, coordinated among a number of fields within the humanities, social sciences and sciences: history, geography, philosophy, literature, mathematics, political science and sociology, and a core-course in multidisciplinary studies. If you remember my opening comments regarding the history, mentality and traditions of my own institution, you will better grasp our sense of accomplishment in establishing this multidisciplinary program in the first year of undergraduate studies. The programme is geared towards studying common, key concepts within six chosen "moments" in the human odyssey. One of those concepts is la cité, relating to the rights and values of a given community of citizens at a specific moment in time, and one of the key moments in this human odyssey is modernity. I chose to teach these elements of the programme by asking the question as to whether the rise of women's rights throughout the 20th century provided proof that we were indeed living in a "modern" society: in fact, whether women were (or could be) full and acknowledged members of la cité in our modern society.

I found that this restructuring of the teaching of women's history works well, for a number of reasons. It connects to other fields which are struggling with the same concepts and it presents women's history as a tool for a critical understanding of the past, rather than as a cumulative knowledge base of that past. This approach to teaching women's history is also more demanding and requires a great amount of sharing among colleagues of different fields in order to succeed, as the goal of integrating the teaching of the different fields represented within the programme is fundamental to its success.

PHYLLIS E. LeBLANC

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The afternoon's formal presentations sparked a surprisingly wide-ranging discussion that covered a number of key themes:

1. Women were concerned about inclusivity: how to identify this as a priority and how to ensure that it remains on the agenda. Recognizing that gender, even as it is socially constructed, shapes the way we think about ourselves and our world, women wanted to see it embedded as a category of analysis whenever and however scholars seek to understand and explain that world.