

## **Taking Stock of Suffragists: Personal Reflections on Feminist Appraisals**

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Résumé de l'article

La théorie de position a rendu les historiennes féministes particulièrement conscientes de la « mise en situation » de toute démarche. La relation intime qu'ont les universitaires avec leurs sujets humains signifie que les choix et interprétations se transforment rapidement en occasions d'engagement dans les luttes modernes de principes et de pratiques. Étant donné que les campagnes en faveur du droit de vote ont servi de leitmotiv du premier mouvement des femmes, les suffragettes ont une emprise très spéciale sur l'imagination féministe. Cette question importante fait de toute étude des activistes canadiennes une importante mise à l'épreuve des positions universitaires et populaires dans la construction d'un passé significatif. Le présent article énonce les réflexions d'une historienne féministe sur l'engagement des suffragettes.

# Taking Stock of Suffragists: Personal Reflections on Feminist Appraisals

VERONICA STRONG-BOAG

## *Abstract*

*Standpoint theory has made today's feminist historians especially conscious of the 'situatedness' of all approaches. The intimate relationship of scholars with their human subjects means that choices and interpretations readily become sites of engagement in modern contests of principles and practice. Because the franchise campaigns were a leitmotif of the first women's movement, suffragists have a particular purchase on the feminist imagination. This special significance makes appraisals of Canadian activists an important test of scholarly and popular standpoints in the construction of a meaningful past. This paper sets forth one feminist historian's reflections on engagement with the suffragists.*

## *Résumé*

*La théorie de position a rendu les historiennes féministes particulièrement conscientes de la « mise en situation » de toute démarche. La relation intime qu'ont les universitaires avec leurs sujets humains signifie que les choix et interprétations se transforment rapidement en occasions d'engagement dans les luttes modernes de principes et de pratiques. Étant donné que les campagnes en faveur du droit de vote ont servi de leitmotiv du premier mouvement des femmes, les suffragettes ont une emprise très spéciale sur l'imagination féministe. Cette question importante fait de toute étude des activistes canadiennes une importante mise à l'épreuve des positions universitaires et populaires dans la construction d'un passé significatif. Le présent article énonce les réflexions d'une historienne féministe sur l'engagement des suffragettes.*

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TAKING STOCK OF SUFFRAGISTS:  
PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON FEMINIST APPRAISALS

Portraits of historical figures make especially unconvincing candidates for “god talk.”<sup>1</sup> Standpoint theory has made today’s feminist historians especially conscious of the “situatedness” of all approaches, including their own.<sup>2</sup> While all sound scholarship requires the careful search for and study of evidence, it also occasions a dance between the interpreter and the interpreted. The storyteller, as a product of her own time and circumstances, influences in turn the choice of both dance partners and steps followed. Ruder feelings, whether of love, distaste, sympathy, or cynicism, readily seep in when history is manifested in individual stories. The intimate relationship of historians with their human subjects means that choices and interpretations also become sites of engagement in modern contests of principles and practices.

### **A Personal Approach to the Suffragists**

Rich with portraits constructed in the course of both broad interpretations of reform efforts and individual biographies, Canadian suffrage studies provide a case in point of the interplay of subject and author. Because the franchise campaigns were a leitmotif of the first women’s movement, suffragists have a particular purchase on the feminist imagination. This special significance makes appraisals of Canadian activists an important test of scholarly and popular standpoints in the construction of a meaningful past.

These pages take up the suggestion of noted American biographer and critic Carolyn Heilbrun that “practicing biographers” have much to “teach each other” in the better appreciation of what we bring to the study of past lives.<sup>3</sup> Self-reflection seems especially valuable since Canadians have an obvious appetite for commemorating individuals, as Penguin’s recent commissioning of the “Extraordinary Canadians Project,” in which all of the only three women among the 18 subjects, hail from the suffrage period, confirms.<sup>4</sup> The need for reflection is all the greater since as Australian scholar Rosamund Dalziell has suggested, Canadian “criticism” of the biographical approach has been slow to develop.<sup>5</sup>

As I look back over my career, I realize that I have often traced the lives of Canadian women active during the franchise campaigns, a scholarly trajectory that I didn’t consciously choose when I first sought in the 1970s to explore questions that inspired me as an historian and a feminist. Evolving historiographic concerns, contemporary feminism, and the course of my own life have informed my continuing education in individual lives and my reflections here. As American historian Susan Ware has noted:

To talk about biography is also to talk about the biographer, for the precise reason that behind every biography lies autobiography — that special spark that draws the biographer to the subject in the first place and the interaction that unfolds as the project moves forward (or stalls, as often happens). As feminist

theory reminds us, the personal element is relevant to the broader intellectual agenda.<sup>6</sup>

She also described my experience when she observed that feminist biographers often struggle with “ambivalence,” “not just with concern about discrediting an admirable woman, but with ... feelings of disappointment, even, perhaps, dislike.”<sup>7</sup> The editors of an important volume on feminist biographies have identified much the same problem:

For most of us, because we were women writing about women, our heightened consciousness of the role of gender meant an especially close relationship with our subjects .... We had to struggle through various stages of identification and rejection in order to achieve the distance necessary for a critical stance.<sup>8</sup>

In English Canada, interpretations of the suffragists, including my own, have fluctuated in much this way as assessors struggled to balance shifting sentiments of sympathy and cynicism. Attraction between feminist authors and such subjects stems most obviously from recognition that franchise campaigners fought a worthy battle that benefited later generations. Reservations are also, however, likely. Cynicism, what the dictionary defines as a “general distrust of the integrity and motives of others,” has been a ready by-product of growing recognition that suffragists readily shared the ideas about class, race, and sexuality that were current in their day, and so often for that matter in ours.<sup>9</sup> It is only too easy to find in our foremothers reminders of our less worthy selves and views we have learned to hold responsible for many of the ills of the world.

### **“Women Worthies” Demonstrate the Merits of their Sex**

Suspicion was not the first response. When women so readily disappear from public memory, seemingly heroic survivors have often been much cherished as a demonstration of the merits of their sex. The suffrage generation occupies a special position in the Canadian memory pantheon. Only the female founders of New France have collectively invoked similar passion.<sup>10</sup> Initial commentators often credited prominent figures such as Nellie McClung, Augusta Stowe Gullen, and Emily Murphy, with essential contributions to their communities and to the future of their nation. Early representations profiled them as so-called “women worthies.”<sup>11</sup> That gallant portrait, captured so well by Catherine L. Cleverden in *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada*, has remained powerful.<sup>12</sup> As the involvement of many with historical societies demonstrates, Canadian suffragists understood that history supplied the grist for contemporary battles for equality.<sup>13</sup> Nineteenth and twentieth century activists regularly pointed to inspirational foremothers in North America and elsewhere as evidence of their sex’s overall competency. That resort to the past continued in the

TAKING STOCK OF SUFFRAGISTS:  
PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON FEMINIST APPRAISALS

years after enfranchisement. Even as women were rarely incorporated into the national narratives provided by academic history departments,<sup>14</sup> an eclectic assortment of popular recorders, frequently inspired by feminist sympathies, celebrated the suffragists as advancing educational opportunities, pioneering in social welfare, and serving democracy. In short, they made Canada a more just nation.<sup>15</sup> Their efforts kept alive the collective and institutional memory that the nation was never solely a male product and persisted into the twenty-first century as a vital component of Canada's public and amateur history-making.<sup>16</sup>

In many ways, Canada's popular feminist biographers created a parallel universe peopled by heroic female figures.<sup>17</sup> Courage, conviction, and challenges to restrictive conventions were commonplace traits of the admired. Book-length treatments of Emily Murphy and Helen Gregory McGill and briefer accounts of other worthy figures appeared well before the emergence of women's history as a scholarly field in Canada.<sup>18</sup> The sympathies of groups such as the Canadian Nurses' Association and the Canadian Federation of University Women underlay persisting efforts at commemoration. The latter, for example, supported the publication of Mary Quayle Innis's pioneering collection *The Clear Spirit: Twenty Canadian Women and their Times* (1966).

### **Mounting Disillusionment**

In the 1970s, the appearance of scholarly women's history initially promised to build on popular traditions of sympathy and common, though effectively white, sisterhood. Early research and reference bibliographies documented growing awareness and appreciation of the significance of women's input into all facets of community life. Response soon, however, became more conflicted. Two powerful influences curbed enthusiasm. On the one hand, the professionally prescribed skepticism of many emerging feminist scholars resisted unbridled endorsement. In the 1960s and 1970s, historians and many others were particularly eager to question traditional leadership and we, quite rightly, learned not to take motivation for granted. The evolution of feminism had a similar impact, directing unprecedented scrutiny to the ways that class, race, and sexuality, among other aspects of identity, undermined sisterhood and generated prejudice and oppression. Under such a microscope, few traditional heroines or heroes survived unscathed.

Views on the first feminists were never precisely the same in French and English Canada. On the one hand, both saw the emergence of feminist scholarship closely associated with the modern women's movement and were self-conscious about contemporary scholarly concerns. Path-breaking studies of Quebec's most prominent feminist group, the *Fédération nationale Saint-John-Baptiste*, and its founders, such as Marie Gérin-Lajoie, typically emphasized the significance of class and race or culture in the struggle for democracy and equality. These approaches readily rejected the nation-wide

generalizations that flourished among anglophones, generalizations that failed to take into account the colonized history of Quebec.<sup>19</sup> From my perspective as an outsider, the feminist daughters of Quebec's Quiet Revolution also seemed notably alert to the forces of reaction, most especially from the priests, intellectuals, and politicians. As one such scholar pithily summed up this perspective, "the anti-suffragist forces shouted from the rooftops."<sup>20</sup> The emphasis on a distinctive national record and a greater preoccupation with feminism's enemies helped, I suspect, to protect, at least somewhat, the reputation of the province's franchise activists. Their crusade for justice seemed, at least at first glance, an especially monumental undertaking and their courage and conviction more unreservedly deserving of respect. Quebec's feminist scholars also appeared to become more interested in radical working-class heroines, such as the trio memorably recovered by Andrée Lévesque. Ultimately, French Canada's middle-class suffrage pioneers do not seem to have provoked much sustained scrutiny.<sup>21</sup> The response of Quebec feminist scholars to the first woman's movement requires, however, the attention of a more knowledgeable eye than mine and my remarks focus on developments in the rest of Canada.

I was an active participant in English Canada's encounter with the suffragists, a story that literature scholar Janice Fiamengo has invaluable described.<sup>22</sup> I was among a small group of academically-trained feminists who hoped to liberate our nation's history. The first doctoral theses in English-Canadian women's history were completed respectively at McGill University by Carol Lee Bacchi, at York University by Wendy Mitchinson, and at the University of Toronto by myself. All addressed the so-called progressive era, roughly from the 1870s to the 1920s, when the franchise campaigners were most active in English Canada. While only Bacchi's study, which became especially influential when published as *Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists, 1877–1918* (1983), concentrated specifically on the franchise campaign and none constituted a biography per se, each offered a rich portrait of early feminist activists. My introduction to a re-issue of the Canadian feminist classic *In Times Like These* (1915; 1972), by Nellie L. McClung, was in much the same vein, as was Wendy Mitchinson's *The Proper Sphere: Woman's Place in Canadian Society* (1976).<sup>23</sup>

Since all three of us set out to be taken seriously as professionals, we paid keen attention to scholarly trends. In particular, we situated our subjects in the context of the emerging historiography on the turn-of-the-century English-Canadian reformers who targeted immigration, industrialization, and urbanization in the interest of an emerging urban middle-class of European origin. Our sights focused particularly on the efforts of leading women to join their menfolk in exercising authority over the new Canadian state. In the beginning, we paid relatively little attention to groups, notably immigrants, workers, and First Nations, reformers attempted to discipline. Nor for that matter, did we

TAKING STOCK OF SUFFRAGISTS:  
PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON FEMINIST APPRAISALS

concern ourselves overly much with the nature of their opponents or the deep misogyny of the age. While we recognized patriarchy and were beginning to discover ourselves as feminists, we concentrated on charting a female story of middle-class nation-building that matched the largely male narratives being constructed by other university-trained scholars.

Our preoccupation with social control paradigms and explanations questioned the reputations of the entire so-called progressive movement of which suffragists were a part. Their self-interest made them at best uncertain candidates for celebration.<sup>24</sup> Growing enthusiasm for the “new social history” and “history from the bottom up” shifted attention to new and seemingly more worthy subjects. Scholars such as Joan Sangster, Linda Kealey, and Janice Newton set out to recover female workers and union, socialist, and communist activists.<sup>25</sup> These were commonly positioned as sympathetic, even heroic, when considered against a backdrop of bourgeois hegemony and frequent working-class and leftist misogyny. In life, such non-hegemonic women had criticized middle-class suffragists as speaking for their class rather than for their sex and their opinions resonated with post-1960s investigators.

The emergence of postcolonial and anti-racist scholarship further sharpened reservations about the suffrage mainstream. Scholars such as Marianna Valverde rightly insisted upon the significance of the eugenic, anti-Semitic, and anti-immigrant prejudices of feminism’s first standard-bearers.<sup>26</sup> Interventions by Sylvia Van Kirk, Jennifer Brown, and Sarah Carter, among others, made white liberals or progressives often seem like oxymorons when it came to relations with Canada’s First Peoples in particular.<sup>27</sup> Immigrant stories salvaged by investigators such as Varpu Best, Jean Burnet, Franca Iacovetta, Marlene Epp, and Frances Swyripa further inscribed the significance and the contribution of women who were very much not part of the suffrage mainstream.<sup>28</sup> The influential and appropriately titled collection *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women’s History*, edited by Franca Iacovetta and Marianna Valverde, exemplified recurring suspicion that claims to sisterhood were highly improbable and perhaps even duplicitous.<sup>29</sup> As historian Bonnie G. Smith has explained of similar developments in the United States, “By late 1970s, historians had devised tests of loyalty to gender, race, and class” and “the prominent woman caused consternation among scholars to whom oppression was the principle theme of the history of women.”<sup>30</sup>

Such scholarship was deeply influenced by contemporary feminism’s deepening awareness of the lineage and linkage of multiple oppressions in a class and colonial society. Longstanding heroines such as Murphy, McClung, and Clara Brett Martin appeared self-interested moral reformers who were more the cause of than the solution to inequality. Their class, racial, and heterosexual loyalties appeared to make them uncertain candidates for celebration. By the last decades of the twentieth century, response to English Canadian suffragists became in

some ways the touchstone of both contemporary scholarship and feminist politics more generally. The progressive credentials, highlighted in early testimonials, such as Elsie McGill's biography of her mother and Cleverdon's *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada*, now seemed largely unconvincing to the skeptics fighting their own battles for a perfected Canada and a perfected feminism.<sup>31</sup>

### **Acknowledging the Complications**

Even in face of pervasive distrust, consensus as to the true colours of the suffragists never emerged. Spirited debates among feminist historians about women's and gender history demonstrated the commonplace lack of unanimity about the relative weight of race, class, and sexuality when it came to understanding the motivation of historical subjects?<sup>32</sup> The absence of the formative influence of a certain moment in Canadian graduate and undergraduate education in history in the 1960s and 1970s for certain feminist scholars also helps to explain significant exceptions to the tendency to target suffragist failings. Take the case, for example, of Deborah Gorham, who was a faculty member at St. Patrick's College, Carleton University, in the same years that Bacchi, Mitchinson, and myself were finishing our doctoral programs. She was trained in philosophy at McGill and then in history at Wisconsin before finishing a doctorate in British history at the University of Ottawa. Informed by her studies of English feminists, her interest in Flora MacDonald Denison, one of Canada's rare "suffragettes," was much more attentive to the comparative radicalism of her subject and the deep hostility of the dominant culture.<sup>33</sup>

Another dissenter was Barbara Ann Roberts (1942–1998), an American-born critic of the Vietnam War, an undergraduate in Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University with a Ph.D. in history from the University of Ottawa, and a long-term academic itinerant who settled at Athabaska University in 1988. Her *A Reconstructed World: a Feminist Biography of Gertrude Richardson* provided a rigorous but also sympathetic assessment of a woman who moved in 1911 from the English working class to rural Manitoba. Richardson's peace, religious, and suffrage radicalism was interpreted as an early expression of multiculturalism.<sup>34</sup>

Scholarly biographer Irene Howard charted still another route to effective heroism in her endorsement of Vancouver suffragette Helena Gutteridge. Born in 1922, Howard was old enough to have personal memories of the suffrage generation. Her own social democratic inclinations combined with a Masters in English to produce strong sympathies for her subject.<sup>35</sup> Noteworthy in these exceptions to the dismissal of suffrage radicalism were the working-class roots of their subjects. Such origins helped defuse the charges of privilege commonly laid against their middle-class counterparts.

TAKING STOCK OF SUFFRAGISTS:  
PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON FEMINIST APPRAISALS

Other developments also fostered recognition of suffrage's complicated history. By the end of the twentieth century, feminist historians were paying more attention to the restraints on all women's lives. Bacchi, Mitchinson, and I reflected that larger trend. Immediately after our graduate work, all of us shifted course. Bacchi immigrated to Australia to become a prominent feminist theorist who illuminated, among other matters, the difficulties of challenging patriarchy.<sup>36</sup> Wendy Mitchinson moved on to two influential studies of "malestream" medicine's construction of female bodies as "naturally" inferior to spotlight the pervasive prejudice that handicapped all women.<sup>37</sup> As part of a research program that grew to include domestic labour and women's life-cycles, I examined the rage that targeted students at the Kingston and Toronto Medical Colleges for Women and the anti-feminists of pre-World War I Canada. Later projects, many with Carole Gerson, on E. Pauline Johnson (1861–1913) placed the mixed-raced writer and performer firmly within both Aboriginal traditions of anti-colonialism and the resistance to male privilege represented by the New Woman of the late Victorian and Edwardian ages. Simultaneously conservative and radical, this Iroquois-English icon of Canadian nationalism embodied many of the contradictions of other public women of her day.<sup>38</sup> Over the years, I occasionally returned to McClung with growing personal and professional understanding of the depth of opposition to all calls for greater gender equality. The shifting balance of cynicism and sympathy could be traced in the multiple editions of the best-selling compendium on Canadian women's history *Rethinking Canada: the Promise of Women's History* (1988), edited by myself and others, and the revisions of *Canadian Women: A History*, co-authored by Wendy Mitchinson and several of our scholarly friends and contemporaries. Ernest Forbes's influential defense of Maritime activists provided an especially cogent reminder of the adage that circumstances, in this case a conservative provincial society, were as important as character in determining the politics of the suffragist generation.<sup>39</sup>

As the twenty-first century dawned, however, suffrage stories found relatively few academic practitioners in English, as in French, Canada. While the period produced an unprecedented range of biographies of Canadian women, few focused deliberately on franchise activists. A new feminist pantheon appeared in such racialized heroines as Marie-Joseph Angelique, Edith Eaton (Sui Sin Far) and Winnifred Eaton (Onoto Watanna), and Mary Ann Shadd, who seemed to speak better to the age's more inclusive politics.<sup>40</sup> When more mainstream writers, artists, politicians, and activists received their own overdue attention, their suffragism, if it existed, rarely got much ink. Such was the case with Mary Kinnear's careful investigations of Manitoba writer and lieutenant-governor's wife Margaret McWilliams and the Canadian League of Nation's and International Council of Women bureaucrat and activist Mary McGeachy. Kinnear effectively demonstrated, however, that better knowledge of middle-

class activists contributes “towards the comprehension of the complexity of feminism, its definition, application, and meaning, not only in the past, but also in the present.”<sup>41</sup> Terry Crowley’s biography of Canada’s first female MP, Agnes Macphail, was similarly judicious, informative, and sympathetic, as was his treatment of Isabel Skelton in *Marriage of Minds: Isabel and Oscar Skelton Reinventing Canada*. Like Margaret Conrad’s approach to Canada’s first female cabinet minister, Ellen Louks Fairclough, these feminist authors acknowledged on-going hostility to female intellectuals and activists and highlighted the costs, as well as the rewards, of women seeking to make their mark on their nation and the world.<sup>42</sup> Treatment of these noteworthy Canadians, all of whom appeared on the national stage shortly after the initial franchise victories, never attracted the same controversy as the suffragists. For all their individual significance, they do not occupy the same place in the national story.

In their determination to reclaim for the canon the female writers, many of whom were suffragists, of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, scholars of English-Canadian literature have similarly tended to sidestep debates about or at least not to judge their subjects’ racial, class, and sexual politics. Janice Fiamengo summed up the common approach to authors Agnes Maule Machar, Sara Jeannette Duncan, Pauline Johnson, Kit Coleman, Flora MacDonald Denison, and Nellie McClung:

I seek neither to praise nor to blame the writers in my study but rather to read them carefully and appreciatively. My goal is to understand and articulate the strategies through which they forced their public selves and to attend closely to their passionate and fascinating words. While I do feel liking and admiration for all of them, my objective is not to defend them from charges of racism or maternalism or to hold them up as subversive models form which present-day activists can learn, but to read them as evidence of the complexity and vibrancy of writing and public performance of the age.<sup>43</sup>

That measured response is another indication that we are entering a new age of suffrage studies.

### **The Suffragists Continue to Matter**

As the larger-than-life statues of the “Famous Five” on Parliament Hill, installed in 2000 amidst considerable debate, demonstrate, the suffragists continue to occupy an unrivaled position in the English-Canadian feminist and national imaginary.<sup>44</sup> Nellie McClung, Irene Parlby, Emily Murphy, Henrietta Muir Edwards, and Louise McKinney, and others like them, remain key and controversial in a liberation movement that continues into the present. In their own lifetimes they inspired savage criticism and heartfelt admiration. From their time to our own, commentators have judged the suffragists in the context

TAKING STOCK OF SUFFRAGISTS:  
PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON FEMINIST APPRAISALS

of their own concerns, or lack of them, about freedom and equality.

The inspiration to cynicism, with its attention to the limitations of our predecessors, properly persists, but we must also address what it actually meant to challenge any part of the gendered status quo. For my part, I hope to contribute to a more balanced assessment of the suffrage generation by returning to the study of Ishbel Marjoribanks Gordon, or Lady Aberdeen as she is more commonly known. This governor-general's wife, "first lady" of the Dominion from 1893–1898, attracted my early interest as first president of the National Council of Women of Canada, the subject of my doctoral thesis. I first understood her role as consolidating a respectable forum for maternal feminism and was preoccupied with her failure to take a more progressive and forceful stance on suffrage questions. From this perspective, Ishbel seemed to embody the efforts of social élites to discipline other classes and races in the imperial world. Over the years, however, I've slowly come to a keener appreciation of the conservatism of many Canadians and others on the "woman question" and begun to reconsider my too-easy dismissal of this "aristocrat democrat." Today my investigations of her life in Scotland, Ireland, England, and Canada, repeatedly document a larger-than-life figure who both inspired and shocked her contemporaries. However conservative she seemed from my vantage point in the 1970s, her demands for higher education, good jobs, freedom from violence, and political power for women clearly offended many defenders of the status quo. Very much hand in hand with her husband, she maintained a life of commitment to an international liberalism that embraced what constituted in her own time feminism, multiculturalism, and democracy. While she retained high hopes for élite leadership and relished her high connections, Lady Aberdeen remained a feminist, anti-slavery, pro-Irish, union sympathizer, anti-Nazi and reforming Scottish landlord until the end of her life. That perseverance is a remarkable achievement that deserves our close attention at least as much as her failure to match today's feminist ideals.

As I move further away from that young graduate student who judged the suffragist generation as wanting, I increasingly marvel at their stubborn determination. Ishbel, like Nellie McClung and E. Pauline Johnson, aged in the trenches of a struggle for a better world; most of their contemporaries sat on the sidelines. Although their vision, like our own, was sometimes faulty and incomplete, it also embodied an uncommon personal politics of courage and optimism. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, in the midst of seemingly surging conservatism, I am acutely aware of how easy it is to surrender or merely go quiet. It remains historically important that these women did not give up the fight for greater equality. As a young scholar, I helped uncover the clay feet of suffragists; today, at least somewhat wiser, I am more likely to remember my own. Feminists don't have to be perfect to be worth a respectful hearing.

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**VERONICA STRONG-BOAG** enseigne l'étude des femmes et de la problématique hommes-femmes ainsi que l'étude de l'éducation à l'Université de Colombie-Britannique. Elle est membre de la Société royale du Canada et s'intéresse à la vie des femmes et des enfants au Canada.

### Endnotes:

- 1 The American theologian Rosemary Reuther coined this term, which offers a good short hand reminder of the dangers of claims to absolute objectivity and authority. See her *Sexism and God-talk: toward a feminist theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993). This usefully updates her original insights from the 1970s and 1980s to recognize ethnocentrism and the need for culturally sensitive interpretations.
- 2 See the useful summary of standpoint theory in Elizabeth Anderson, "Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2009 ed.), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2009/entries/feminism-epistemology/>>, (viewed 6 January 2011). At its most basic, a feminist approach to a subject requires sensitivity to the role of gender/sex in determining opportunity and a recognition that girls and women in most human societies have had less access to critical resources than boys and men and that this inequality, rooted in patriarchy, is fundamentally unjust. Modern feminism also requires acknowledgement of inequality's diverse forms. Needless to say, both women and men, as the authors identified in this article demonstrate, can be feminist. For a useful discussion of feminist biography, see also Susan Ware, "Writing Women's Lives: One Historian's Perspective," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 40, no. 3 (Winter 2010): 417.
- 3 Carolyn G. Heilbrun, "Review Essay. Feminist Biography," *NWSA Journal* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 121.
- 4 <<http://www.extraordinarycanadians.com/subjects/index.html>>, (viewed 6 January 2011).
- 5 Rosamund Dalziel, "Speaking Volumes about Auto/biography Studies in Canada," *English Studies in Canada* 34, no. 2-3 (June/September 2008): 214. On the growth of auto/biography studies in Canada and internationally, see Julie Rak, "Introduction — Widening the Field: Auto/biography Theory and Criticism in Canada," in *Auto/biography in Canada: Critical Directions*, ed. J. Rak (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), 1-30.
- 6 Ware, "Writing Women's Lives," 413.
- 7 Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Second Thoughts: On Writing a Feminist Biography," *Feminist Studies* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 237.
- 8 Sara Alpern, Joyce Antler, Elisabeth I. Perry, and Ingrid W. Scobie, eds., *The Challenge of Feminist Biography: Writing the Lives of Modern American Women* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 10.
- 9 *The Free Dictionary*, <<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/cynicism>>, (viewed 5 January 2011).
- 10 This useful term originated with Natalie Zemon Davis, a distinguished scholar of Europe and women's history, who was at the University of Toronto in the 1970s.
- 11 See Jan Noel's classic article "New France: Les Femmes Favorisées," in *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History*, eds. Veronica Strong Boag and Anita C. Fellman (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), 23-44; Allan Greer, "Chapter 4: Women of New France," in A. Greer, *The People of New France* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 60-75; and

TAKING STOCK OF SUFFRAGISTS:  
PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON FEMINIST APPRAISALS

- Colin M. Coates and Ceclia Morgan, *Heroines and History: Representations of Madeleine de Verchères and Laura Secord* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).
- 12 Catherine L. Cleverden, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950).
  - 13 Beverly Boutilier, "Women's Rights and Duties: Sarah Anne Curzon and the Politics of Canadian History," in *Creating Historical Memory: English-Canadian Women and the Work of History*, eds. A. Prentice and B. Boutilier (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press 1997), 51–74; Cecilia Morgan, "'Of Slender Frame and Delicate Appearance': The Placing of Laura Secord in the Narratives of Canadian Loyalist History," in *Gender and History in Canada*, eds. Joy Parr and Mark Rosenfeld (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1996), 103–36.
  - 14 On their overall conservatism, see the insightful study by Donald Wright, *The Professionalization of History in English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).
  - 15 For example, see the contributions cited in Veronica Strong-Boag, "Cousin Cinderella: A Guide to Historical Literature pertaining to Canadian Women," in *Women in Canada*, ed. Marylee Stephenson (Toronto: New Press, 1973), 263–90; and Beth Light and Veronica Strong-Boag, *True Daughters of the North: Canadian Women's History, An Annotated Bibliography* (Toronto: OISE, 1980).
  - 16 Veronica Strong-Boag, "Experts on Our Own Lives: Commemorating Canada at the Beginning of the 21st Century," *The Public Historian* 31, no. 1 (February 2009): 46–68.
  - 17 For a modern example, see Merna Foster, *100 Canadian Heroines: Famous and Forgotten Faces* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, Ltd., 2004).
  - 18 See also Kathryn McPherson, "Carving Out a Past: The Canadian Nurses' Association War Memorial," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 29, no. 58 (November 1996): 417–29.
  - 19 See Micheline Dumont, "5. The Origins of the Women's Movement in Quebec," (72–89), and Micheline de Sève, "The Perspectives of Quebec Feminists," both in *Challenging Times: the Women's Movement in Canada and the United States*, eds. Constance Backhouse and David H. Flaherty (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 110–16. Diane Lamoureux, "Idola Saint-Jean et le radicalisme féministe de l'entre-deux-guerres," *Recherches féministes* 4, no. 2 (1991): 45–60; Diane Lamoureux, *Citoyennes? Femmes, droit de vote et démocratie* (Montreal: Éditions Remue-ménage, 1989); Marie Lavigne, Yolande Pinard, and Jennifer Stoddart, "The Fédération Nationale Saint-John-Baptiste and the Women's Movement in Québec," in *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s–1920s*, ed. Linda Kealey (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1979), 71–87; Karine Hébert, "Un organization maternliste au Québec: La Fédération Nationale Saint-Jean-Baptiste et la Bataille pour le Vote des Femmes," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française* 52, no. 3 (hiver 1999): 315–44; Yolande Pinard, "Le féminisme à Montréal au commencement du XXe siècle, 1893–1920" (M.A. thesis, Université du Québec à Montréal 1976); Hélène Pelletier-Baillargeon, *Marie Gérin-Lajoie. De mère en fille, la cause des femmes* (Montreal: Boréal Express, 1985); Laurent Laplante, "Les femmes et le droit de vote: l'épiscopat rend les armes," *Cap-aux-Diamants* 21 (printemps 1990): 23–5; Gilles Boileau, "C'est Adélar Godbout qui a donné le droit de vote des femmes," *Histoire Québec* 10, no. 2 (2004): 11–14; Luigi Trifiro, "Une intervention à Rome dans la lutte pour le suffrage féminin au Québec (1922)," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française* 32, no. 1 (1978): 3–18; Anne-Marie Sicotte, *Marie Gérin-Lajoie: conquérante de la liberté* (Montreal: Éditions du remue-ménage, 2005); Hélène Pelletier-Baillargeon, *Marie Gérin-Lajoie. De mère en fille, la cause des femmes* (Montreal: Boréal Express, 1985).
  - 20 Manon Tremblay, *Quebec Women and Legislative Representation*, trans. Kathe Roth (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press 2010), 21.
  - 21 Andrée Levesque, *Red Travelers: Jeanne Corbin & Her Comrades* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006); as ed. and trans., *Madeleine Parent: Activist*

- (Toronto: Sumach Press, 2005); and *Éva Circé-Côté. Libre-penseuse 1871–1949* (Montreal: Les éditions du remue-ménage, 2010).
- 22 See Janice Fiamengo, “Rediscovering our Foremothers Again: Racial Ideas of Canada’s Early Feminists, 1885–1945,” *Essays on Canadian Writing* 75 (Winter 2002): 85–117. See also her *The Woman’s Page: Journalism and Rhetoric in Early Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).
  - 23 The first two were published with the University of Toronto Press and the third, co-edited with Ramsay Cook, came out with the same major scholarly press, a testament to the general assumption that the early women’s rights movement was part of English Canada’s advance to democracy.
  - 24 See my introduction to Nellie L. McClung, *In Times like These* (1915; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972); and *The Parliament of Women: the National Council of Women of Canada, 1893–1929* (Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1976). For a mainstream expression of this approach by senior scholars of the day, both of whom had been my instructors, see Robert Craig Brown and Ramsay Cook, *Canada, 1896–1921: a Nation Transformed* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974).
  - 25 See Joan Sangster, *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left 1920–1950* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1989); Janice Newton, *The Feminist Challenge to the Canadian Left: 1900–1918* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995); Linda Kealey, *Enlisting Women for the Cause: Women, Labour, and the Left in Canada, 1890–1920* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).
  - 26 See Marianna Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885–1925* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991); and “Racism and Anti-Racism in feminist Teaching and Research,” in *Challenging Times*, eds. Barkhouse and Flaherty, 160–4. See also Arun Mukherjee, “A House Divided: Women of Colour and American Feminist Theory,” 165–74; Glenda Simms, “13. Beyond the White Veil,” 175–81; and Patricia Monture-Okanee, “The Violence We Women Do: A First Nations View,” 193–204, which embodied much of the anti-racist critique that feminist scholars and activists encountered, all also in *Challenging Times*.
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  - 28 Varpu Lindstrom-Best, *Defiant Sisters: A Social History of Finnish Immigrant Women in Canada* (Toronto: Multicultural History of Ontario, 1988); Jean Burnet, ed., *Looking into My Sister’s Eyes: an Exploration in Women’s History* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1986); Marlene Epp, Franca Iacovetta, and Frances Swyripa, eds., *Sisters or Strangers: Immigrant, Ethnic and Racialized women in Canadian History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).
  - 29 Franca Iacovetta and Marianna Valverde, eds., *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women’s History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).
  - 30 Quoted in Alpern, et al., *The Challenge of Feminist Biography*, 4.
  - 31 Elsie McGill, *My Mother the Judge: a Biography of Judge Helen Gregory MacGill* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1955).
  - 32 The most well-known debate was conducted in *Left History*. See Joan Sangster, “Beyond Dichotomies: Re-assessing Gender History and Women’s History in Canada,” *Left History* 3, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1995): 109–21; Karen Dubinsky and Lynne Marks, “Beyond Purity: A Response to Sangster,” *Left History* 3, no. 4 (Fall/Spring 1995–1996): 205–20; Joan Sangster, “Reconsidering Dichotomies,” *Left History* 3, no. 4 (Fall/Spring 1995–1996): 239–48; Franca Iacovetta and Linda Kealey, “Women’s History, Gender History and Debating Dichotomies,” *Left History* (Spring/Summer 1996): 221–37.

TAKING STOCK OF SUFFRAGISTS:  
PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON FEMINIST APPRAISALS

- 33 Deborah Gorham, "Flora Macdonald Denison: Canadian Feminist" in *A Not Unreasonable Claim*, ed. Kealey, 47–70; and Deborah Gorham, "Vera Brittain, Flora Macdonald Denison and the Great War: The Failure of Non-Violence," in *Women and Peace: Theoretical, Historical, and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Ruth Roach Pierson (NY: Croom Helm, 1987), 137–46.
- 34 Barbara Ann Roberts, *A Reconstructed World: a Feminist Biography of Gertrude Richardson* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996).
- 35 Irene Howard, *The Struggle for Social Justice in British Columbia: Helena Gutteridge, the Unknown Reformer* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1992).
- 36 See Carol Lee Bacchi, *Same Difference: Feminism and Sexual Difference* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1990); *The Politics of Affirmative Action: 'Women', Equality and category Politics* (London: Sage, 1996); *Women, Policy and Politics: the Construction of Policy Problems* (London: Sage, 1999); and *Analysing Policy: What's the Problem Represented to Be?* (French's Forest, NSW: Pearson Education, 2009).
- 37 Wendy Mitchinson, *The Nature of their Bodies: Women and their Doctors in Victorian Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991); and *Giving Birth in Canada, 1900–1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).
- 38 Among other things, see Veronica Strong-Boag and Carole Gerson, *Paddling her Own Canoe: The Life and Texts of E. Pauline Johnson, Tekahiwake* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).
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- 41 Mary Kinnear, *Margaret McWilliams, An Interwar Feminist* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), 166; *Woman of the World: Mary McGeachy and International Cooperation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).
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- 44 See the useful assessment of shifting response to the "Famous Five" by Dianne Dodd, "Canadian Historic Sites and Plaques: Heroines, Trailblazers, The Famous Five," *CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship* 6, no. 2 (Summer 2009), <<http://crmjournal.cr.nps.gov/>>, (viewed 5 January 2011).