

From Bonavista to Vancouver Island: Canadian Women's History as Regional History in the 1990s

Deborah Gorham

Volume 28, Number 2, Spring 1999

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad28_2re01

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Gorham, D. (1999). From Bonavista to Vancouver Island:: Canadian Women's History as Regional History in the 1990s. *Acadiensis*, 28(2), 119–125.

REVIEW ESSAYS/NOTES CRITIQUES

From Bonavista to Vancouver Island: Canadian Women's History as Regional History in the 1990s

IN THE CONTEXT OF RECENT historiographical debates in Canada, women's history and regional history are frequently coupled. Both, it is said, share a commitment to a Canadian history that celebrates diversity. Connections between regional history and women's history are made by historians who practise and support the now not-so-new "new social history" of the last three decades, and also by those who oppose it. Linda Kealey, editor of *Pursuing Equality: Historical Perspectives on Women in Newfoundland and Labrador* (St. John's, ISER Books, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1993), for example, suggests that the interest in "women, ethnic groups, workers and others" that developed in the 1960s and 1970s "also opened up the potential for historical research in Canada which questioned the dominance of a central Canadian focus and stimulated the development of regional perspectives" (pp. 2-3). In contrast J.L. Granatstein sees both women's history and regional history as prime examples of the dangerous and destructive fragmentation he perceives as "killing" Canadian history.¹

Granatstein's recent attack on the "new" historians is as much about politics as it is about historical theory and methodology. The polemical tone adopted in recent years by Granatstein and other proponents of "national" history has served to oversimplify and distort the nature of the similarities as well as the differences between "traditional" political history and the "new" social history. Granatstein, for example, would have it that in the context of Canadian history, only his brand of national history is capable of generating narrative and formulating unifying concepts. The new history, says Granatstein, produces only "unreadable books on minuscule subjects" (p. 140). This dichotomy between the magisterial, unified narrative on the one hand and the fragments on the other is a false one.² When, for example, Granatstein characterizes women's history as "the history of housemaid's knee in Belleville", he reveals his ignorance of the way in which women's history has developed since it began to flourish some three decades ago. Yes, historians of women have, quite rightly, been concerned with revealing the experience of ordinary women,

1 J.L. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto, 1998). I would like to thank the following Canadianist historian colleagues who offered advice and shared their views about regional history with me: Marilyn Barber, Catherine Cavanaugh, Bruce Elliott and Diana Pedersen. I thank my colleagues A.B. McKillop and Susan Whitney for reading the final version.

2 It is interesting to note how much more balanced Carl Berger, writing in 1986, was able to be about contributions of the "new" social history to Canadian historiography. See his chapter "Tradition and the 'New' History" in *The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English Canadian Historical Writing since 1900* (second edition, Toronto, 1986). For an extended critique of Granatstein and the "killing" of Canadian history, see A.B. McKillop, "Who Killed Canadian History? A View from the Trenches", *Canadian Historical Review*, LXXX, 2 (June 1999), pp. 269-99.

including those who did domestic work, but women's history has as well always been concerned with developing its own overarching narratives and tools of theoretical analysis. These include — to name just a few — theorizing patriarchy, creating gender as a category of analysis, analyzing the meaning and history of feminism and exploring such ideological constructs as the notion of separate spheres. Moreover, as women's history has grown in complexity, conflicting narratives and theoretical approaches have emerged. The overarching narratives developed in the 1960s and 1970s began to be scrutinized by groups who asserted that their voices were left out of a history written primarily from the perspective of white, middle-class urban women. In Canada these included African-Canadian women, lesbian women and First Nations women. Histories of these groups on the margins have proliferated in recent years. Does this respect for difference and diversity mean that women's history has dissolved into fragments? Not at all: instead it has fostered a recognition that Canadian women's history, like labour history, ethnic history, or indeed like the political history of the nation-state, will inevitably and properly reflect a healthy dialectical tension between a focus on the specific, and a focus on generalizing concepts.

One source of tension between margin and centre in Canadian women's history has involved regional difference, and historians working in regions outside of Central Canada have for some years been calling the Central-Canadian character of much of Canadian women's history to account. In an article published in *Acadiensis* in 1983, historian Margaret Conrad wrote: "one area of study where women are only beginning to emerge from the grey mists of neglect is Atlantic Canada".³ In 1990, Gail Campbell pointed out in another *Acadiensis* review article that while Atlantic Canadian history was flourishing, not enough research had yet been done in the area of women's history.⁴

Since Campbell wrote that 1990 review essay, the literature on regional women's history has increased, not only in Atlantic Canada but in other regions of the country as well. The seven volumes reviewed in this essay are edited collections that attest to the welcome growth of scholarship in this vein. Reading them together was a delight. While not all parts of Canada are included in these volumes (most notably none is about Quebec and there is little about the most northerly parts of Canada), nonetheless these books, read together, gave this reviewer some of the pleasures of an armchair journey across the country. The seven volumes differ in terms of intention and tone, but they all reflect their editors' and contributors' conviction that history must be, in part at least, about the specific and the local, and that women's experience, like men's, is influenced by geography.

Two of the volumes are about Atlantic Canada. *Pursuing Equality* focuses on women's rights activism in Newfoundland and Labrador from the early 20th century to the present. There are only three articles in the book, all of them excellent and all full of the rich detail and specificity that make for outstanding local history. Margot

3 Margaret Conrad, "The Re-Birth of Canada's Past: A Decade of Women's History", *Acadiensis*, XII, 2 (Spring 1983), pp. 140-62.

4 Gail G. Campbell, "Canadian Women's History: A View from Atlantic Canada", *Acadiensis*, XX, 1 (Autumn 1990), pp. 184-99.

Duley's essay on the women's suffrage movement of 1909-1925, benefits greatly from the author's Newfoundland roots: she is the niece of one of the suffrage activists whose activities she chronicles, and her intimate knowledge of the people and the locality shine through, giving her piece a vividness that comes from a keen sense of place.

Separate Spheres: Women's Worlds in the 19th-Century Maritimes (Fredericton, Acadiensis Press, 1994), edited by Janet Guildford and Suzanne Morton, includes ten contributions concerned with aspects of women's history in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. Of all the collections under review here, *Separate Spheres* is the one that is most definitively a contribution to historical scholarship: there are no articles on the contemporary women's movement, and while the book is attractive enough to engage the "general reader", the editors and contributors write as academic historians whose primary goal is to expand knowledge within that context. By and large, they do an excellent job. Guildford and Morton's sound and useful introduction helpfully places the contributors' work within the context of Maritime history and women's history. They have much to say in their introduction about the volume's unifying theme, which is, as the title indicates, an analysis of the contradictions within separate spheres ideology, and they have ensured that the contributors to the book incorporate their specific investigations within that theme. There are some wonderful pieces in the book. These include Rusty Bittermann's "Women and the Escheat Movement: The Politics of Everyday Life on Prince Edward Island" which creatively challenges conventional perceptions concerning gender and violence and intelligently grapples with the complexities of gender ideologies. Bittermann's piece is not only challenging conceptually; it contains the flavour of the specific locality as does, for example, Sharon Myers's chapter on female industrial workers in turn-of-the-century Halifax.

Two of the seven volumes reviewed here are concerned with Ontario history. *Changing Lives: Women in Northern Ontario* (Toronto, Dundurn Press, 1996), edited by Margaret Kechnie and Marge Reitsma-Street, both professors at Laurentian University in Sudbury, is the most interdisciplinary (rather than strictly historical) of the volumes under review and the one with the most evident activist feminist intention. The volume came out of an interdisciplinary conference on women's Northern experience held at Laurentian in 1995. In contrast to the scholarly intention of *Separate Spheres*, the primary purpose of this volume is to reach out to a wide variety of women living in Northern Ontario and to begin to tell their stories. The volume's contributors are in some cases academics, but in several cases they are not. The resulting mixture of traditional academic articles with more personal pieces could be seen as producing an uneven volume, but for me the mixture of styles and approaches is one of the strengths of *Changing Lives*. Thus, on the one hand, we have Jennifer Keck's and Mary Powell's sober analysis of women workers at Inco, but we also have Theresa Solomon-Gravel's interview with her Ojibwa mother, Karen Blackford's piece on a rural teacher of the 1930s, Jennifer Keck, Susan Kennedy and Mercedes Steedman's interesting retrospective thoughts about what they see as the unconscious racism embedded in "Every Miner had a Mother" — an exhibition they mounted as academic activists in Sudbury in 1983 — and Karen Dubinsky's delightful autobiographical piece, "Who Do You Think Did the Cooking?": Baba in the Classroom", on the vicissitudes of feminist oral history. *Changing Lives* is

attractively illustrated with photographs, and all in all, it has the charm, staying power and wonderful sense of place of a successful family album.

The other Ontario collection reviewed here is *A Diversity of Women: Ontario, 1945-1980* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1995), edited by Joy Parr. This is an excellent volume of contemporary history whose contributors include such accomplished historians as Parr herself, Joan Sangster, Veronica Strong-Boag and Franca Iacovetta; historical sociologist Mariana Valverde; historian and feminist activist Nancy Adamson; Native Studies scholar Marlene Brant Castellano writing with Mohawk activist Janice Hill; sociologist and Franco-Ontarian scholar Linda Cardinal; rural sociologist E.A. Cebotarev; and labour activist and scholar Esther Reiter. The articles in the volume deal with women's work inside and outside the home, with the impact of consumerism, with race, culture and ethnicity and with rural as well as urban and suburban locations. As Parr promises in her introductory overview, they provide an important contribution to our understanding of this recent, and therefore little understood, period of transition in women's lives. Although this volume, like others under review here, seeks to make a contribution to regional history, the strongest articles in the book, from the point of view of historical scholarship, are valuable more because of their theoretical insights and their universalizing constructs than because of their contribution to regional understandings. There is less specificity and less of a sense of locality in most of these articles than there is, for example, in *Changing Lives*. This is perhaps because the "region" here is Canada's largest province.⁵

"Other" Voices: *Historical Essays on Saskatchewan Women* (Regina, Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina, 1995), edited by David De Brou and Aileen Moffatt, and *Standing on New Ground: Women in Alberta* (Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, 1993), edited by Catherine A. Cavanaugh and Randi R. Warne, both deal with the Prairies. *Standing on New Ground* provides a nice balance between articles of historical scholarship (such as Michael Owen's essay on Methodist and United Church missionary work) and more freewheeling pieces. Like the *Pursuing Equality* and *Changing Lives* collections, *Standing on New Ground* contains a number of pieces on contemporary feminist issues. The volume's introduction is one of the strongest of the seven reviewed here. Cavanaugh and Warne deal with the complexities of the frontier as myth and as reality, and of the Prairie provinces as "the site of intentional, structured nation building" (p. xi). They combine this discussion of the Prairies as region with a nuanced analysis of the way assumptions about Prairie culture intersected with ideas concerning gender difference, most notably with the ideology of separate spheres.⁶ Guildford and Morton employ the ambiguities embedded in separate spheres ideology as the key organizing concept for *Separate Spheres*, and in the same vein, Cavanaugh and Warne point out that in

5 As historian Bruce Elliott comments: "Ontario is larger than many European countries and makes sense as a region only in political terms": Bruce Elliott, e-mail communication to Deborah Gorham, 15 March 1999.

6 Catherine Cavanaugh has discussed the maleness of the ideology of the West extensively in her "'No Place For A Woman': Engendering Western Canadian Settlement", *Western Historical Quarterly*, 28 (Winter 1997), pp. 493-518.

early 20th-century Alberta society "gender roles were more permeable than separate spheres would suggest. The private and the public were often conflated as women actively made their own lives and communities through their day-to-day work, civic and political action, and community building" (p. x).

There are a number of interesting and important articles in *Standing on New Ground*. Filmmaker Barbara Evans's piece on Jessie Umscheid is especially striking. Jessie Burke Umscheid who was born in Oregon in 1900, but who migrated as a child with her family in 1907 to Milo, Alberta, and who lived all her life as a rural woman, took extraordinary amateur photographs. Evans's analysis of Umscheid's images, her discussion of her interview with Umscheid, and the photographs reproduced with the piece provide a vivid recreation of an unusual individual and a specific locality.

David De Brou and Aileen Moffatt, the editors of *Other Voices*, include an extensive discussion of national and international trends in women's history in their co-authored introduction and in Moffatt's historiographical piece on Saskatchewan women's history. As Moffatt rightly points out "history cannot be written or understood in an intellectual vacuum" (p. 26). The editors discuss the place of "voice" and the place of diversity in Canadian women's history at considerable length in their introduction. De Brou and Moffatt provide a lively discussion of these important issues, but they develop what is in my view a false opposition between "diversity" on the one hand and "gender" on the other. They imply that it is not possible to think of gender as a primary category of analysis and at the same time recognise the importance of diversity. This dichotomy seems to me to be both forced and simplistic as does Moffatt's either/or discussion of the "women's culture" perspective and the "oppression model" in her historiographical essay. Still, the individual pieces in the book all make important contributions to Saskatchewan ethnic and women's history. I especially liked Anna Feldman's oral history study, "'A Woman of Valour Who Can Find': Jewish-Saskatchewan Women in Two Rural Settings, 1882-1939", Theresa Healey's study of working-class women's resistance to welfare policies in Saskatoon during the early 1930s, and Miriam McNab's "From the Bush to the Village to the City; Pinehouse Lake Aboriginal Women Adapt to Change".

The final volume under review is *British Columbia Reconsidered: Essays on Women* (Vancouver, Press Gang Publishers, 1992) edited by Gillian Creese and Veronica Strong-Boag. This is a collection of 21 articles, many of which have appeared elsewhere. They are organized thematically to cover such topics as pioneering, politics, domestic life, culture, work and poverty. The volume concludes with a useful bibliographical essay by Theresa Healey. In their introduction, Creese and Strong-Boag emphasize their political convictions: "women's studies and feminist scholarship in British Columbia have substantial contributions to make to the creation of a more equitable society" they say, and they advocate the importance of interdisciplinarity in feminist work. Of the historical essays included, several provide memorable glimpses into British Columbia's distinctive and colourful past. Sylvia Van Kirk's "A Vital Presence: Women in the Cariboo Gold Rush, 1862-1875" is a good example of this.

The seven volumes under review here reflect the importance that has been given to the concept of "region" in English-Canadian historiography. In an article published in 1980 William Westfall wrote: "the region has assumed a position of prominence in Canadian studies . . . the region seems destined to rival, if not replace, the nation-state as the central construction of Canadian studies".⁷ Westfall also pointed out that the

term region is “frustratingly imprecise” but that in a Canadian context two implicit definitions of the term exist: the concept of region can relate to “the impact of the physical environment” or to the “metropolitan-hinterland relationship” (p. 6). At the end of the 1990s, the concept of region remains both imprecise and highly politicized. The fact that Canada’s existence as a unitary nation-state has been an intensely contested political issue during the past three decades has had its effect on Canadian scholarship. A focus by historians on the concept of region may be one way of acknowledging that the construction of a one-nation narrative is neither possible nor desirable in a Canadian context.⁸

Historians of women, like historians of other marginalized groups, have always known that successful one-nation narratives (such as those generated by United States or French historiography) have great imaginative power, but that they tend to ignore or distort the experience of everybody except for the mythmakers. Therefore a historical approach that focuses on region could indeed be seen to have a special affinity for historians of women. The editors and contributors to the volumes under review may well believe this to be the case, but it is interesting that there is little or no discussion of the definition of “region” itself in a Canadian context in any of the books under review. Regional divisions — the Maritimes, the Prairies, even Ontario — are taken as given and the value of focusing on the region is assumed rather than confronted directly. But the English-Canadian concept of region as an alternative to Nation only partly solves the thorny problems that arise from the contested nature of Canadian nationhood: many Quebec francophones do not consider Quebec to be a region, but rather a non-sovereign nation, and Aboriginal peoples define themselves as nations as well. Moreover, some of the regions — Ontario especially — are so large, that they do not really constitute regions if “region” is defined as referring to a locality with a specific geographical, cultural and economic unity.

In addition to contributing to Canadian regional historiography, these volumes all constitute contributions to the international field of women’s history and feminist scholarship. The editors’ introductions, read together, reveal a number of common concerns. These include a discussion of gender as a category of analysis, a belief that feminist historians must be aware of feminist scholarship in other disciplines and an interest in extending the reach of women’s studies scholarship beyond the academy. All the editors are concerned, as are women’s historians everywhere these days, with the importance of acknowledging the diversity of women’s experience. All struggle with the challenges “diversity” presents to traditional scholarship. In this regard, it is worth noting the way in which the history of First Nations women is approached in these volumes: with one exception, Miriam McNab’s contribution on Pinehouse Lake women, all the articles dealing with First Nations experience are either based on oral interviews or are personal accounts.⁹ These accounts are valuable, illuminating and in

7 William Westfall, “On the Concept of Region in Canadian History and Literature”, *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 15, 2 (Summer 1980), pp. 3-15.

8 Westfall implies this in his 1980 article — “The forces that glorified an all encompassing nationalism [are] in retreat” (p. 13) — and the Canadianist colleagues who kindly shared their views with me expressed similar sentiments.

9 *Changing Lives, A Diversity of Women and British Columbia Reconsidered* all contain oral history/personal narrative contributions. Miriam McNab’s “From the Bush to the Village to the City: Pinehouse Lake Aboriginal Women Adapt To Change” is in “*Other*” *Voices*.

some cases they make for compelling reading. The oral history approach is meant to be, and in fact is, respectful and mindful of the dangers of the appropriation of voice that scholarship — even feminist scholarship — may impose on groups suffering from multiple disadvantages. However, there are negative aspects of placing First Nations women's history outside the realm of objective, less personal scholarship. Invaluable as personal testimony is for women's history, there is also a place for investigations of a more general nature, such as the McNab study.

In conclusion it should be noted that these collections of articles on Canadian women from the perspective of region are part of a complex, multi-faceted and extensive literature in Canadian women's history published during the 1990s. This literature includes major monographs as well as many collections of articles organized along thematic lines, and at least one major overview, the second edition of *Canadian Women: A History*.¹⁰ Women's history and feminist scholarship are indeed flourishing in Canada.

DEBORAH GORHAM

10 On the wealth of literature in Canadian women's history, see Diana Pedersen, *Changing Women: Changing History: A Bibliography of the History of Women in Canada* (second edition, Ottawa, 1996), and Alison Prentice, Paula Bourne, Gail Cuthbert Brandt, Beth Light, Wendy Mitchinson and Naomi Black, *Canadian Women: A History* (second edition, Toronto, 1996).