

***Pursuing Equality: Historical Perspectives on Women in Newfoundland and Labrador.* Edited by Linda Kealey; *Their Lives and Times: Women in Newfoundland and Labrador: A Collage.* Edited by Carmelita McGrath, Barbara Neis, and Marilyn Porter.**

Ann Marie Powers

Volume 13, Number 2, Fall 1997

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds13_2rv02

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Powers, A. M. (1997). Review of [*Pursuing Equality: Historical Perspectives on Women in Newfoundland and Labrador.* Edited by Linda Kealey; *Their Lives and Times: Women in Newfoundland and Labrador: A Collage.* Edited by Carmelita McGrath, Barbara Neis, and Marilyn Porter.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 13(2), 200-202.

Pursuing Equality: Historical Perspectives on Women in Newfoundland and Labrador. Edited by Linda Kealey. St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research 1993. Pp. x, 209, appendices, bibliography, glossary, index. \$24.95, softcover, French flaps, ISBN 0-919666-77-9.

Their Lives and Times: Women in Newfoundland and Labrador: A Collage. Edited by Carmelita McGrath, Barbara Neis, and Marilyn Porter. St. John's: Killick Press, Creative Book Publishing, 1995, xii, 354 pp., \$19.95, softcover, French flaps, ISBN 1-895387-42-6.

ANN MARIE POWERS

BOTH OF THESE BOOKS provide the reader with insightful, poignant and thought provoking analyses of women's lives in Newfoundland and Labrador, spanning more than two centuries. Together, they are a welcome and much needed addition to the literature on the history and ethnography of women in Newfoundland.

Pursuing Equality is a collection of three essays covering the legal and political history of women in Newfoundland and Labrador during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The introductory essay by Linda Kealey, the editor, provides a bibliographical overview of the literature and presents ideas for future study. The first essay, by Margot Duley, traces the history of the women's suffrage movement in Newfoundland from 1909 to 1925. She traces the roots of the movement through archival data, as well as interviews with descendants of the early suffragettes, citing the Women's Christian Temperance Union with being the first to bring the issue of the vote for women to the forefront in the 1890s. Later, the Ladies Reading Room and the British Dominion Women's Suffrage Union (later The International Alliance of Women) helped to widen the circle of supporters and membership in the Newfoundland Women's Franchise League. The diversity of membership was

crucial in the League's success in obtaining the vote. Integrating the political and economic events of the early part of the twentieth century, Duley weaves a story of the suffragist struggle, from the mockery they had to endure, to the war and the political corruption within the government.

In "A Woman's Lot," Linda Cullum and Maeve Baird enrich our understanding of how laws influenced and shaped the lives of Newfoundland women — from early settlement through to all the stages of the life cycle. In a comprehensive outline, Cullum and Baird discuss the development of early law in Newfoundland, prior to its becoming an official colony in 1824, through to post-Confederation. Tracing the increasing complexity of the Newfoundland legal system, we learn about the policy discouraging female settlers, as well as laws rooted in the belief that women were chattels, without privileges enjoyed by men — the rights to vote, to sit on a jury, custody of children and control of property. The patriarchal attitudes of the general public, legislators and judges shaped the legal rights — and lives — of the women of Newfoundland and Labrador and denied them the right to personhood. Inequities existed within the home and in the work force with regards to pay, security, benefits and physical protection. The authors discuss the problems women faced in marriages — from abuse to sexual assault — as well as problems faced in childbirth, pregnancy and divorce. The essay provides an excellent overview of the trials and triumphs of women in Newfoundland's developing legal system.

The third essay in this collection on the modern women's movement in Newfoundland chronicles the history of women's groups in Newfoundland, focusing on the period from 1970 when the Royal Commission on the Status of Women confirmed that women were subject to systemic social injustices. The authors, Sharon Gray Pope and Jane Burnham, describe the relationships among the various women's groups within the province, and discuss their activities and interests. In their efforts to be inclusive, they include so much information that, at times, their discussion is difficult to follow. Yet it is apparent that while they don't always have the same ideological perspective, the women's groups within the province have been effective in promoting social equality. The women's movement in Newfoundland is a story of dedication to the concept of equality and justice. Although government funding effects the direction and effectiveness of the women's movement, it is a story of dedication to the concepts of justice and equality.

In *Their Lives and Times*, we are presented with a provocative collection of essays, stories, poems and reflections — some old — some new, about the historical and contemporary position of indigenous and European descendant women in Newfoundland and Labrador. Reading this volume, I simultaneously and alternately laughed, cried, became angry, was hopeful and also horrified. This is indeed a thoughtful, emotional and evocative anthology — and one that has been long overdue. The articles are written by women from various disciplines and backgrounds and are integrated and presented in a way that is accessible to the general

public, as well as to academics. For example, Marilyn Porter's article, "She Was Skipper of the Shore Crew," is a sociological/feminist analysis of how women's work in the (salt cod) fishery enabled them to establish control over their own domain within the household economy, despite the sexual division of labour. Their daily activities, their hardships and their triumphs are elaborated upon in the pieces by Greta Hussey and Bernice Morgan's excerpt from *Random Passage* (1992).

The editors open the anthology with a quote (which they unfortunately do not credit in the bibliography) by [P. K.] Devine [*In the Good Old Days! Fishery Customs of the Past*. Harry Cuff Publications, 1990, 24.] Referring to a woman who at one time worked at night slitting cod's heads, she would then "wash down the splitting table, and get upon it, would put up her skirts, and dance an Irish jig to her own singing." (vii) From this point forward we are introduced to the depth and diversity of women's lives and, in particular, how their lives were shaped by patriarchal authority in their triumphs and their resistance.

Rather than focus exclusively on the fishery, the editors have included articles which present the various contributions, dilemmas and choices (or lack thereof) of women in Newfoundland and Labrador—from wage labour, especially after World War II and post-Confederation, to reproductive rights and fishery co-operatives. Several enable us to better understand how patriarchal attitudes which influenced women's legal rights, as discussed by Linda Cullum and Maeve Baird (above), were developed and internalized within the society. The article by Cecelia Benoit examines the arrival of the airforce base in Stephenville in terms of how it heightened patriarchal control, even though it originally held the potential for women's freedom. Miriam Wright, Jane Robinson and Victoria Silk each examine government policies and attitudes toward women in the fishery and how these resulted in the virtual exclusion of women. Clearly, government managers and policy makers succeeded in creating situations of dependence, abuse and invisibility for women.

While many of the articles touch upon how the fishery (and now the lack of one) has influenced women's lives, they look beyond socio-economic concerns by offering some new and creative insights. This is a welcome and much needed collection that presents further avenues to explore and hear, as well as increasing our knowledge and understanding of women's lives in Newfoundland and Labrador.