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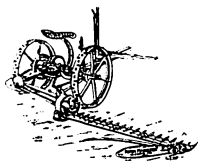
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Book Reviews / Comptes rendus



Marianne Gosztonyi Ainley, ed.

Despite the Odds: Essays on Canadian Women and Science.

Montreal, Véhicule Press, 1990.

Science in this country – as in much of the world – has historically been the domain of men. Not unnaturally, therefore, the history of science has focused on the “men of science”, their ideas, theories, discoveries, innovations, practices. But this is not to suggest that Canadian women have shunned the pursuit of scientific knowledge until only recently. Nor is it true that they have made little contribution to, or impact within, the field. Rather, the lacunae in our own historical knowledge of women in science is due in large part to the neglect of historians.

As Marianne Ainley argues in her introduction, women’s “lack of visibility” resulted from a myriad of historical processes: restrictions on women’s higher education, gender-typing of occupations, limits on career advancement, and “the minimal representation of their achievements in textbooks and reference books” (18).

By examining science principally in its academic, institutional and political contexts, they have necessarily “missed” women’s participation, since these public stages were, by definition, masculine territory. Thus, since science is here defined broadly to take in medicine, mathematics, social and applied sciences, technology, and innovation. More important, it is ascribed a cultural and relational dimension as a “social activity practiced in a variety of settings on many different levels” (17). This compilation of recent studies on the historical role of women in science is consequently both timely and significant in the way that it attempts to redirect the focus to areas, themes and topics where the “women of science” are the key historical actors.

The collection is structured conveniently for classroom discussion. The first of its three sections, “Historical Studies”, includes contributions by Ainley herself on women natural scientists; Clara Chu and Bertrum Macdonald on pre-World War I scientific publications by women; Margaret Gillett on botany at McGill, and

specifically the work of Carrie Derick; Lykke de la Cour and Rose Sheinin on women's experience at the Ontario Medical College at the turn of the century; an inaugural piece by E.E. Stieb, Gail Coulas and Joyce Ferguson on women in pharmaceutical sciences in Ontario, 1867-1927; Dianne Dodd on the interrelations of women, the advertising industry, domestic technology, and mass consumerism; a biographical sketch by Susan Hoecker-Drysdale on three important women sociologists (Helen MacGill Hugues, Aileen Dansken Ross and Jean Robertson Burnet); and a delightful consideration of women's role in photographic technology by Diana Pederson and Martha Phemister.

In the second section, "Biographical Studies", we are presented with more detailed life histories of women in particular scientific fields, including medicine (Maude Abbott); nuclear physics (Harriet Brooks); geology (Alice Wilson); horticulture (Isabella Preston); plant pathology (Margaret Newton); mathematics (Cypra Cecilia Krieger); and psychology/gerontology (Blossom Wigdor). The closing section, "Contemporary Concerns", addresses a wide variety of subjects and issues affecting Canadian women and their role in response to "the scientific" in our own day.

It is encouraging to see the resourcefulness and courage with which these issues are approached by women, and yet also disheartening to see how old stereotypes and outmoded theories about gender and its implications for understanding science, mathematics, and technology persist despite the very real evidence that women have, and continue to, make their mark in these areas. In particular, the essays by Karen Messing on feminist scientific research, and Gillian Kranias on women and scientific change, are worthwhile attempts to theorize the place of women within science. They demonstrate that social convention and cultural ideas have always played a vital part in determining the scientific studies/findings of a historical period, all protestations about "objectivity" to the contrary.

While much of the work on women and Canadian science, as this volume shows, remains preliminary and tends to traditional biography, this compilation is an effective and valuable introduction to themes, topics, and lives that have too long suffered the neglect – or disdain – of historians. There is much to be learned here by specialists in the history of science and technology, and also by social historians concerned with gender roles and images in our past.

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