

Constructing Feminist Histories of Immigrant Women

Burnett, Jean, ed. *Looking Into My Sister's Eyes: An Exploration in Women's History*. Toronto: The Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1986. Pp. ix, 242. \$10.00

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proportion of the population living in cities increased in this era, too. The result of White's inclusiveness is a proliferation of passages in which each succeeding short paragraph, at times every sentence, deals with a different major issue. The reader's head begins to swim with facts, unrelieved by colour. Even a figure as colourful as William Lyon Mackenzie becomes simply a label for the radical fringe of Upper Canadian reform, a sort of left-wing Robert Responsible Government. White at times seems to deliberately avoid a good story. We hear nothing of Mackenzie's highly personal slurs on the character of the "Family Compact" or of the consequent relocation of his press to the bottom of Lake Ontario, and there is nary a mention of Laura Secord, perhaps the only figure in the Upper Canadian period some readers will remember. Bothwell demythologizes Mackenzie and yet presents him as a fiery, colourful personality. White's politicians remain match-stick figures in the presence of Bothwell's vividly critical portraits of Hepburn and Drew. The pragmatic Mowat, indeed, is White's representative Ontario Politician, with whom his successors are constantly compared. White is politically cautious, too, though he does venture to pronounce the province's liquor licensing regulations "draconian" (p. 221).

Historical explanation also suffers from White's chronicling technique. Depressions and financial crises are simply events which have political consequences; they have no causes of their own. Bothwell structures his book to a far greater extent to facilitate promoting the reader's understanding of why things happened. His explanations are often briefer than White's, but they tend to hit home with greater emphasis because of his admirable economy of words, apt turns of phrase, and better sense of organization.

White's is also a curious book with which to kick off a local history series, as it pays little more than lip service to regionalism. Indeed, he uses the word "regional" as equivalent to "provincial." He recognizes the distinct political cultures of eastern Ontario and the south-western peninsula, but these distinctions become, predictably, less important as one leaves Upper Canada in the past. Bothwell, too, cites this "serviceable generalization" but he at least notes that it becomes "clearer and truer" when "reduced to a township-to-township basis" (p. 99). One would expect the introductory volume to a series of local histories to place greater emphasis upon regional variation, the elucidation of which is arguably one of the strongest reasons for doing local history at all. If the authors of future volumes in the OHF series commit themselves to writing good local histories, we can hope that a radically different history of Ontario can be written at a later date. The first book in the series attempts nothing so revisionist, but instead aims to provide the local historian with a handy reference to the provincial background against which to view sub-regional variations on major themes. For this the book is scarcely adequate. Any local historian exploring a theme will immediately need more information than White's book provides, and the decision to

exclude endnotes suggesting further reading, while according with the customary wisdom that references toll the death-knell for general sales, leaves the reader nothing to fall back on. The bibliography is no substitute for this — consisting as it does almost entirely of books — since much of the best work on Ontario's history is to be found in periodical literature.

It is, nonetheless, nice to see that Ontario has been judged worthy of two provincial histories after so many years. Some will see poetic justice in the fact that one of the commissions originated in Alberta. Much work remains to be done before the history of Ontario can be rewritten to reflect an understanding of the province's internal diversity, but in the meantime the uninitiated can find a pleasant introduction in Bothwell's *A Short History of Ontario*. The serious local historian will still prefer to have the better volumes of the Centenary Series near to hand.

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A large body of literature on the process of overseas migration to Canada and the construction of urban ethnic enclaves in Canadian cities has obscured the role and experiences of migrant women. One basis for the preoccupation within migrant and ethnic studies with the male experience resides in the great numerical imbalances of men over women in migration and during the lengthy periods of sojourning fostered by early Canadian industrialization. The invisibility of women has additionally been abetted by the stereotypical assumptions regarding the passive and non-productive roles of female migrants underlying historical and sociological ethnic studies.

Looking Into My Sister's Eyes is the first collection of articles which deals exclusively with the experiences of immigrant women in the processes of migration and settlement in Canada. While not achieving (nor claiming to strive for) a feminist *volte-face* in ethnic and migration studies, this pioneering book succeeds in filling in many of the silences on the social history of immigrant and "ethnic" women in Ontario.

Comprised by thirteen articles and a brief introduction by the editor, the book explores the diverse roles and experiences of women in the migration process itself, the family, labour force, and ethnic institutions and organizations. The subjects of this collection are women originating from both 'preferred' sources of immigration such as Britain and northern Europe, and from southern and eastern European, Middle Eastern and Asian countries regarded by immigration authorities as populated by rude peasants or workers, too far removed in temperament, culture and complexion to assimilate to British norms of settler acceptability. Women from these latter 'nontraditional' sources were accordingly discouraged from entering Canada by a system of head taxes, quotas and other administrative restrictions, and their numbers in Ontario remained low prior to the Second World War.

While the experience of making one's home in a strange new country was rarely an easy one, material and social hardships could be vastly mitigated by ethnic and class advantages. Hopkins provides a portrait of the lives of five British gentlewomen — including the famous sisters, Susannah Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill, who settled in the backwoods and towns of what is now southern Ontario during the first half of the nineteenth century. The rich bequest of letters, diaries, journals and manuscripts left by these educated women itself attests to their exceptional privilege and ability to carve out relatively leisured lifestyles in comparison with less advantaged pioneer women. While their gentility could not cushion these women and their families from the severe climate, isolation and hardships common to bush life, their move to prosperous farmlands and towns generally brought increased material comforts, social contacts and class advantages not unlike those enjoyed in the Old Country.

The domestic servants who came to Canada between 1900 and 1930 from the British Isles did not enjoy the class privileges of their upper middle-class counterparts. Barber attributes the decision of single British women to journey to Ontario to the insatiable demand for domestic workers, stories of higher wages in the new country, family connections, and recruitment literature which stressed the strength of British traditions and way of life in Ontario society. While British imperial ties expedited the movement of English, Scottish and Irish domestics to Ontario, they provided a lesser guarantee of successful accommodation to Ontario's working and living conditions. Brought over to toil in strange households, British domestics found that differences in climate, technology and diet required adaptation in their labour process. While the discovery of vacuum cleaners in Toronto compelled one Irish domestic (used to cleaning carpets by spreading and sweeping tea leaves) to exclaim that she thought she had "died and gone to heaven" (p. 65), complaints about hard work and long hours rivalled more positive assessments by domestics of the working conditions.

Lindstrom-Best's account of Finnish domestic workers in Canada from 1911 to 1930 illuminates the similarities of status and work conditions among domestics which transcend ethnicity and often time. Physical isolation coupled with lack of privacy, autocratic control by employers and difficulties in having families of their own were the considerable social costs borne by both Finnish and British domestics. Both groups of women sought to mitigate and escape these hardships by seeking support from ethnic institutions, such as the socialist locals of the Finnish Organization of Canada and Finnish employment agencies, and for British domestics, the Church of England, the Presbyterian Church and Women's Hostel. Organizing efforts among Finnish domestics were fuelled by the strong current of socialist activity among Finns and enjoyed brief successes in Montreal, Toronto, Sudbury, Sault Ste. Marie and Timmins. Resistance to servile treatment also involved attempts to maximize autonomy in employment by quitting often during the first year of employment and relying on networks of information to negotiate more effectively with employers.

Unlike British and Finnish domestics who migrated as single women, the majority of female immigrants entered Canada via family migration channels as fiancées, wives, sisters and mothers of male immigrants. Several articles in this volume emphasize the prime importance of the familial context and the family economy in guiding the behaviour of women in matters of sexuality, domestic labour, waged work and community activity. Sturino, writing about pre-war southern Italian migration to Toronto, depicts the protection of women's sexual honour both in Italian peasant society and in the urban ethnic enclave as a keynote to the stability of the family unit. While the pervasive demands of the honour complex might evoke the resentment of individual women, in Sturino's view, they were the primary determinant in both the conduct of sexual relations and in the prevalence of paid homeworking among Italian women.

Two of the strongest contributions to this collection, Iacovetta's account of southern Italian women in the post-war period and Petroff's study of Macedonian women to 1940, illuminate the complex nature of gender relations in the immigrant household. While patriarchal precepts and distinct gender roles manifested themselves in all-male coffee houses, all-female occupational enclaves and the obsessive concern about female sexual purity, gender relations in immigrant families were far more intricate, contradictory and variable than the model of male-dominance/female submission suggests. The exercise of power by women was greatest in the private sphere where as Iacovetta observes, women "made effective use of their capacity to argue, nag, manipulate, disrupt normal routine and generally make life miserable for men in order to achieve certain demands" (p. 202). Draper and Karlinsky maintain that "within the European Jewish family structure, women were the undisputed rulers of the household" (p. 75).

In Canada, the constant striving of immigrant women to gain control in the private sphere of the family household spilled over into the conduct of public matters such as the running of family businesses. The family-owned restaurants, corner stores, boardinghouses and laundries in Toronto's Macedonian and Chinese communities frequently operated more as "joint stock companies," with women playing indispensable and often equal roles with men, than as ventures following the dictates of patriarchal heads.

All too often migration research ignores the social relations and productive roles of immigrant women in their countries of origin and thus erroneously assumes that their entry into waged labour is a step towards emancipation. Iacovetta, Sturino and other authors emphasize that in the context of mass migration by men, women played key roles in their home countries' subsistence and burgeoning cash economies. In the Old Country, the distinction between men's and women's work became blurred as women increasingly engaged in back-breaking agricultural work, supervised family property and conducted family business with strangers. Although the integration of immigrant women into the Canadian capitalist labour market as new wage workers entailed novel forms of exploitation and new work experiences, it did not require a fundamental break in norms of hard work, or compliance with ethnic community structures.

The ingenuity, resilience and entrepreneurialism of immigrant women were put to a severe test with the death of a husband and the loss of the major source of family income. The survival skills of widowed women are poignantly conveyed in Nipp's exploration of women in Ontario's tiny Chinese communities of the interwar period. One Toronto widow kept her family alive by preparing a nutritious, though unsavoury, steady diet of fish heads. Another diminutive widowed woman, whose feet had once been bound, supported her family in the laundry she ran by labouring seventy and eighty hours per week over boiling vats of clothing.

Community organizations formed another public site where the contradictory themes of women's submission to traditional roles and their self-expression and resistance to male dominance were played out. A central objective of many of the articles is to document the vital contributions made by immigrant women to their respective community's welfare, language, ethnocultural and religious education, and maintenance of group cohesion. Constraints imposed by women's domestic responsibilities and the traditional male dominance of community governance inhibited the adoption of leadership positions by women in the majority of ethnic community structures. Kojda, Polyzoi, Kaprielian and Swyripa, writing about Polish, Greek, Armenian and Ukrainian women's associations respectively, report that such organizations accommodated to the supportive and subsidiary tasks relegated to "ladies' auxiliaries" by male policymakers.

Yet many women's organizations also provided both training grounds for the development of organizational skills and an atmosphere of cooperation and mutual assistance lacking in the more hierarchical structures of male-dominated organizations. During crises in the Armenian community such as internecine struggles, the collectivism and solidarity nurtured by women's organizations could be mobilized to hold the community together, thus contradicting stereotypes of "women's proverbial obedience to their husbands" (p. 149). Draper and Karlinsky document the more direct resistance taken by working class, East European Jewish women in Toronto who responded to their exclusion from decision-making in the Labour Zionist Movement by forming their own Pioneer Women's Organization. The goals of this organization were both explicitly feminist and socialist, until the Holocaust and creation of Israel shifted the attention of the community as a whole to political, nationalist concerns.

Epp and Epp attribute the inroads made since the 1960s by Mennonite women into both the community's church organizations and professional careers to the influences of the feminist movement, including a more egalitarian division of domestic responsibilities and increased educational opportunities for women. The call by a significant segment of the Ontario Mennonite community for increased conservatism and retrenchment of male authority in Mennonite households is a stark reminder of the fragile and contested nature of women's liberation in ethnic minority communities, as in the society at large.

Looking Into My Sister's Eyes helps redress the invisibility of women in the Canadian ethnic studies and immigration literature. One of the strengths of the book lies in the images it projects of immigrant women as creative and purposeful agents who manipulate and shape their social environments to varying degrees. The articles also collectively convey the diversities, ambiguities and contradictions that characterize the female immigrant experience, mediated by class, ethnicity and historical period of migration.

Before closing, it is useful to consider what has not been accomplished in this book. The methodological reliance on oral histories and community newspapers in many of the articles provides rich insights into women's lives from the perspectives of community spokespersons and the women themselves. But in pursuing this research strategy, some authors pay insufficient attention to factors 'external' to ethnic communities. Thus, the key influence in shaping immigrant women's work and home lives of structural constraints (e.g.: local labour markets, state welfare policies, racial discrimination) and dominant societal ideologies are often ignored. Some authors document the influence of racist notions of 'assimilability' in limiting non-British immigration prior to the 'liberalisation' of immigration policies in the 1960s and 1970s. They fail, however, to consider the significance for immigrant women of the racism which

permeated the culture of post-war Ontario cities and which become attached to differences of an "ethnic" (non-British, non-Protestant) character. (An important exception is Iacovetta's account of the anxiety and fear among Italian women in Toronto during the 1950s evoked by their daily confrontation with prejudice).

The reader is also left with the impression that the pre- and post-war preoccupation among immigrant women with domesticity and familial responsibilities was a peculiarly "ethnic" trait, when such traditional ideas about women's appropriate roles characterized the dominant gender ideology of Canadian society. The descriptive nature of some of the articles also precludes a more systematic treatment of issues of concern to feminist historiography such as the specificity of the social relations and patriarchal ideologies mediating the sexual division of labour and demands of production and familial life for different groups of immigrant and ethnic women.

Looking Into My Sister's Eyes represents an important beginning in studies presenting and validating the experiences of immigrant women in Canada. Some of the essays in this book help assimilate the experiences of immigrant women into existing analytical categories; the best of them aid in reconstructing our understanding of migration and social history to make it richer, more inclusive and carefully nuanced.

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Baccigalupo, Alain, avec la collaboration de Luc Rhéaume. *Les administrations municipales québécoises des origines à nos jours*. Tome 1, Les municipalités. Montréal: Agence d'Arc, 1984. Pp. 611. \$16.00.

Combien de fois n'avons-nous pas entendu ceux et celles qui s'intéressent au domaine des affaires municipales déplorer l'absence d'un ouvrage général abordant la question sous son angle administratif? C'est ce vide que l'auteur tente de combler en nous présentant son «anthologie administrative», qui devrait offrir un accès rapide à l'information que recèlent de nombreux textes législatifs et réglementaires ainsi que certaines publications gouvernementales régissant l'organisation et le fonctionnement des collectivités locales au Québec.

L'examen de la table des matières nous révèle qu'aucun des aspects importants n'a été oublié. C'est donc avec un certain enthousiasme qu'on entreprend la lecture de cet ouvrage, malgré le caractère aride des textes que regroupe généralement ce genre de recueil.

Cet enthousiasme est toutefois de courte durée. La déception vient dès le premier chapitre, consacré à l'histoire des administrations municipales. Les textes portant sur chacune des trois périodes qui ont marqué la mise en place et l'évolution de nos institutions locales (régimes français, anglais et confédéral) devraient nous aider à mieux saisir comment et pourquoi certains changements institutionnels se sont produits. Or, si on nous laisse entrevoir le comment, nous trouvons peu d'indices sur le pourquoi. Le régime confédéral, source d'une répartition des pouvoirs qui servira de base à l'édification des structures actuelles, revêt une importance particulière; malheureusement, la section qui s'y rapporte nous laisse face à des textes pratiquement «livrés à eux-mêmes». Ni l'introduction ni la conclusion du chapitre ne viennent combler cette lacune.

Étant donné la complexité des structures administratives locales, on s'étonne de ce que l'auteur n'y consacre qu'une soixantaine de pages. Des trois approches choisies pour aborder ce thème (sociologique, institutionnelle et conceptuelle), une seule réussit vraiment à l'éclairer: l'approche institutionnelle. Quant aux deux autres, trop courtes et incomplètes, elles donnent l'impression d'un travail bâclé et laissent sur sa faim le lecteur qui espérait une vision globale du sujet.

La partie de l'ouvrage consacrée aux élus locaux intègre habilement des textes législatifs, des témoignages et des tableaux concernant tant le processus électoral que l'exercice des fonctions d'élu. C'est là un des apports les plus intéressants du livre.

Le chapitre qui traite des fonctions publiques comporte un exposé très complet sur les fonctions des gérants locaux, leurs relations avec les élus et l'évolution de leurs rôles. Il est dommage que les autres sections du chapitre n'aient pas bénéficié du même traitement; ainsi, on ne connaîtra des autres officiers municipaux que la définition législative de leurs fonctions, et des employés salariés que le contenu des diverses conventions collectives régissant leurs conditions de travail et les étapes du processus de recrutement.

Puisant à des sources plus variées que dans la plupart des autres chapitres, l'auteur arrive à mettre un peu de vie dans la longue énumération que constitue le chapitre sur les services. Il ne dépasse cependant pas cette énumération, même si la conclusion propose un début de réflexion sur l'inégalité des citoyens devant les services offerts et sur la normalisation des niveaux de services municipaux.

Le livre se termine par un chapitre sur les finances municipales. On nous y présente les étapes et les débats qui ont mené à l'adoption récente de la Loi sur la fiscalité municipale, et l'impact de cette réforme sur l'évaluation foncière et sur le revenu des municipalités. Le sujet est complexe, mais l'auteur réussit à le clarifier et à faire ressortir