

## BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTES RENDUS

Alison Prentice, Paula Bourne, Gail Cuthbert Brandt, Beth Light, Wendy Mitchinson, and Naomi Black. *Canadian Women: A History*. Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988. 496 pp., illus., \$24.95, paper.

*Canadian Women: A History* is an interesting, at times fascinating, volume. Highly readable prose makes it appealing both to readers generally and to scholars of education in particular. The inescapable reality is that children have throughout historical time spent their early years primarily under the care of females, so that by learning more about the lives of women we inevitably become more knowledgeable about that of their charges. *Canadian Women* also includes extensive detail directly on schooling, particularly that accorded girls, and on women teachers.

The reasons behind the volume's success relate both to form and to content. Experience suggests that expectations for multi-authored general histories should not be placed too high. Anyone who has struggled as a volume editor is well aware of the difficulties involved in integrating the prose of individuals with differing intellectual orientations and styles of writing. To achieve a single voice through multi-authorship is even more difficult, but this the six scholars behind *Canadian Women* have accomplished to a remarkable degree. Part of the reason may lie in their common "feminist" perspective, defined in tripartite fashion as "a commitment to

increasing women's autonomy in a world where it has generally been less than men's," a recognition "that women's situation and experience are distinctive," and an insistence "that women should not be judged inferior by male standards or in comparison with men" (p. 14).

*Canadian Women* is not only a multi-authored volume but also a general overview, a form of scholarship which usually tends to be so detached from the specifics of time and place as to make for boring reading however useful might be the larger insights embodied in the text. Due in part to the volume's length—virtually 500 pages—*Canadian Women* also overcomes this potential limitation in form. Ample use of example, often centering on individual women and groups of women, encourages the reader to move from page to page, eagerly anticipating the next topic and chapter. Moreover, despite the six authors all being based in Ontario, this is a national history. The female experience that comes through the pages of *Canadian Women* ranges widely across geographical space.

Even more than form, it is the content of *Canadian Women* that makes the volume so exciting. While perforce drawing primarily on secondary sources and therefore bound by the literature as it happens already to exist, the authors have reconceptualized the traditional categories of Canadian historiography. The volume is divided into four long chapters around the "three major turning points in the history of women in Canada" (p. 13): the mid-nineteenth-century

transition to an industrial society leading to some paid female employment; the achievement of the two major goals of early female reform, suffrage and prohibition, during World War I; and the entry of large numbers of married women into the paid labour force at the beginning of World War II. Each chapter begins with a very useful summary and is then divided into between three to five subchapters. Well-chosen illustrations and eminently readable tables enhance the text.

Chapter 1, "The Founding Mothers," begins, as it rightly should, with the world of Native women in pre-contact and early contact societies. It then appraises the position of women in New France, interpreted as being stronger than in France itself as attested by their relative freedom of choice in marriage, the existence of some financial support for older women and widows, and considerable participation in commercial and religious life, indirectly also in politics. Turning to British North America, *Canadian Women* emphasizes women's adaptability in the face of increased regulation of their roles as daughters, wives, mothers, and human beings.

Chapter 2, "The New Pioneers," spans the seven decades between 1850 and 1920 during which Canada was economically and demographically transformed. First exploring the diversity of unpaid and paid labour, the chapter moves on to analyze what contemporaries viewed as "women's sphere." While the dominant society perceived it almost exclusively in terms of male-oriented domesticity, "women themselves had a much

richer, more complex and positive concept of their own roles and lives," including "the importance of their ties to other women" (p. 148). The work of female reformers is explored at length in its various manifestations from missionary societies to temperance and suffrage groups.

Chapter 3, "The Promised Land?" focuses on the interwar years, examining women's paid work, home life, and the slow emergence of women in the public domain. Chapter 4, "The Unfinished Revolution," moves the history of women in Canada forward in largely chronological fashion from World War II to the Charter of Rights. Throughout somewhat institutional in perspective, this final major chapter is particularly valuable in integrating, possibly for the first time, the diverse experience of women across Canada over recent decades. Its account of the rise and course of the feminist movement is outstanding.

To praise *Canadian Women* highly is not to suggest that it is without fault. The experience of women in Quebec comes across at times as little more than a counterpoint to that of their English-speaking contemporaries. Such diverse groups as non-English-speaking immigrant women and female artists, writers, and poets receive scant attention until after World War II. Conversely, whereas Native women quite appropriately begin the volume, they then totally disappear from view until the 1960s. The volume's multi-authorship may well explain this unevenness in content.

Overall, *Canadian Women* is a powerful volume. Neither preaching

nor condemning past transgressions, it very effectively documents women's historical experience and by so doing charts necessary future directions for Canada to maximize the potential contribution of all its citizens.

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**John Webster Grant.** *A Profusion of Spires: Religion in Nineteenth Century Ontario.* Toronto, University of Toronto Press for the Ontario Historical Studies Series, 1988. 283 pp., illus., \$30.00.

In the popular imagination nineteenth-century Ontario has generally been regarded as an intensely religious society. School history books have taught generations of children that religion played a central role in the lives of the early pioneers. But, as John Webster Grant carefully indicates in this fascinating and well-written monograph, this was not quite the case. In fact, Christianity's hold on Ontario was not secured until the middle years of the century.

Grant begins his review of Ontario's religious history with an interesting account of the religion of the Indians. He continues to refer to the native people throughout the book, which is a refreshing change from the usual concentration on the white man's activities. Yet the bulk of the book is concerned with the growth of the various Christian denominations. For those familiar with Ontario's history all the old chestnuts are here. Once again we meet those jarring and flam-

boyant personalities—the Strachans, Ryersons, Charbonnels, and a host of others. The old quarrels—church-state relations, clergy reserves, social gospel—all make their appearance. The difference here is that Grant puts them in their place! Or to be more exact, he weaves them into an interpretative framework that sheds new light on these tired issues.

The religious development of Ontario, he argues, can be divided into two eras which roughly approximate to a division at the time of Confederation. The first period was basically an attempt to persuade the population to attend a church. It was an era of institution-building. According to the census data which Grant quotes this was a very successful effort. By 1871 only 1.2% of the people considered themselves (or perhaps dared to admit it) as not belonging to one denomination. It was largely the main denominations—the Church of England, the Church of Rome, the Presbyterians, and the Methodists—who benefited. Yet the road to glory was not entirely smooth for any of these groups. All of them were rent with internal struggles which the immigrants brought with them from their homelands. In an intriguing chapter entitled, "Echoes of Europe," he details these battles, how they affected the growth of each of these denominations, and how often these differences were linked to ethnic backgrounds. This description reflects one of the most valuable aspects of this monograph and that is the author's ability to link local events and episodes to similar movements in other parts of Western Christianity, especially in the