
"Having an agenda" means one has a goal and a plan to reach that goal. For many women in *Our Own Agendas: Autobiographical Essays by Women Associated with McGill University*, plans and goals were not always explicit, yet their stories reveal agendas. This collection of twenty-eight autobiographical essays not only reveals personal agendas, but illustrates differences and similarities among women otherwise linked only by affiliation with McGill University. Some contributors, such as Emily White, Violet Archer, and Erika Ritter, attended McGill as students; others, including Monique Bégin, Rama Ghosh, and Janet G. Donald, worked as professors or administrators. Support staff are not included in this collection, although the editors say they sought a contribution from a member of this group. Authors reflect on their relationship with McGill, questions of feminism, and personal traumas, although some provide merely linear descriptions of their lives, with little or no analysis. The articles are not separated into thematic groups; each essay stands alone and speaks for itself. Although some stories are flat, others are moving and even inspiring. All are important and deserve to be told.

A sequel to *A Fair Shake: Autobiographical Essays by McGill Women* (1984), *Our Own Agendas* includes women from a wider variety of backgrounds. The contributors are from different cultures, professions, and age groups. As a result, the essays are diverse in style and in content. This diversity comes across quite strongly in the various attitudes and beliefs surrounding feminism. Essays by three of the oldest contributors are reminiscent of older-style factually detailed autobiographies. Their attitudes toward feminism, however, are clear. Laura Rowles, for example, studied physics in the 1920s and believes that equity programs and discussions of language use ("picayune fussing about the words ‘chairman’ and ‘chair’") are not only unnecessary but lower the level at which men see women. On the other hand, Ginette Lamontagne, a senior administrator who never expected to be part of McGill, admits that she is a feminist and has benefitted from feminism, but thinks later generations will not need the label feminist.

Several contributors, like Laura Rowles and Ann McCall, take for granted the right to an education and to a career. Others, like Sara P. Gibbs and Patricia G. Kirkpatrick, fought for their right to pursue their chosen careers. Gibbs, in "Fighting for My Own Agenda: A Life of Science," describes her struggle to pursue research in biology despite discouragement. Kirkpatrick’s "Priestesses, Goddesses, Witches, and Whores" provides insight into the path to ordination in the Anglican priesthood and the obstacles that women in organized religions continue to encounter. Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, Annie Neeposh Iserhoff, and others had to fight racism to acquire their education. Nfah-Abbenyi writes,
in "Why (What) Am I (Doing) Here: A Cameroonian Woman," that every time
she enters McGill, she is struck by "the reality of its whiteness." In "Excerpts
from My Life," Iserhoff describes life as a child in the bush, being taken away to
a residential school, and, finally, becoming a Cree teacher. In "Humour and
Death," Lise Demers, also a teacher, presents a different view of growing up in
a Native family. Although she draws much strength from her mother's Algon-
quin family, she also values the French-Canadian culture of her father's family.
The combination of the two allows her to identify herself as a Native woman
with "two-way" knowledge.

Traumatic events and survival play significant parts in several essays. One
inspirational essay is "A Journey Within" by Jane Poulson, a medical practi-
tioner, who describes her acceptance of the onset of blindness as a result of
diabetes in her final year of medical school. In "Prelude," Mary-Margaret Jones
describes and reflects upon her life before and after her mother's death, her life
after being gang-raped at the beginning of her university career, and coming to
terms with herself and her sexuality. A similarly painful contribution is an
anonymous poem, "Life: Parts I–IV," which describes a woman's anger with her
father, who claims to be supportive but demolishes her self-esteem in many little
ways; with the man who raped her at age sixteen at a party; and with the men
who have raped other women. But she also describes her struggle to come to
terms with herself:

I can't give up on me.
Because I have to live with me.
And I want to be happy
with me.

Gillett and Beer argue that autobiography is central to a feminism of
difference. Feminist pedagogy encourages, if not requires, the sharing of per-
sonal stories. Sue Middleton's Educating Feminists: Life Histories and Pedagogy argues
that feminist pedagogy requires an exploration of our own and other's life
histories. The relationships between individual biographies, historical events, and
the broader power relations that have shaped and constrained our possibilities
and perspectives as educators must be analyzed. However, doing so involves
taking both personal and professional risks. Many contributors to Our Own
Agendas do, indeed, take risks in telling their stories. Although some of the
women's achievements come by chance rather than by hard work and ambition,
the generous sharing of personal stories, combined with the narratives of career
achievements make for, as Gretta Chambers says in the Foreword, both "a good
read" and "a moving panorama of personal aspirations and experience." In any
future autobiographical collection, however, the voices of traditionally silent
support staff must be included.

Our Own Agendas is not traditional institutional history. Many essays touch
only indirectly on McGill. Those that do are informative sources for researchers
exploring the history of women and higher education. The essays cover a wide
range of activities and achievements. The stories are as unique and diverse as the
contributors themselves. Margaret Gillett, a long-time professor at McGill, and Ann Beer, an assistant professor also at McGill, have brought together the stories of a wide variety of women. This collection is an important resource for anyone interested in the lives of contemporary women and the history of women's higher education.

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In 1814 Denmark became the first country in the western world to make elementary education compulsory, four years after it had been made compulsory in Copenhagen. The 1814 law stated that every child between the ages of seven and fourteen—the year of confirmation—had to be taught the three Rs and religion.

So far researchers in Danish history have limited themselves to pointing out that, depending on the economic situation of the family, schooling became part of the reality for some children earlier than for others. U.S. historian Carol Gold has chosen another perspective. In her book *Educating Middle Class Daughters*, she concludes that some children had already been to school several years before the introduction of a national education system. According to Gold, the new public education system in Copenhagen stood on the shoulders of an older private school system—and to a large extent depended on it during much of the nineteenth century.

Between 1790 and 1817 there were 261 private "school keepers" in Copenhagen, among whom were 210 women. Half of all children went to school, and of these, 70% went to a private school. The female school keepers share two things: their main reason to keep a school going was economic, and they have all been judged harshly by later generations of historians of education. Gold disputes this interpretation.

In *Educating Middle Class Daughters*, Gold depicts a world of variegated schools, where small dame schools or daycare centres existed side by side with bigger girls' schools or academies. Whereas girls in some schools were taught at a very low level, girls in others were taught at something near high school level.

Female school keepers were mainly single and relatively poor, but in opposition to the tradition that holds the women were mostly illiterate, Gold shows these women could read and write and sometimes more than that. Most had a petit bourgeoisie or artisan background and some came from school keepers' families.