

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Alison Mackinnon, *Love and Freedom: Professional Women and the Reshaping of Personal Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) Pp. xvii,298.

The very title of Alison Mackinnon's book is captivating. Will its author tell us how to find both love and freedom or, at the very least, how other twentieth-century women did so? And how are the professions tied to this problematic equation? As examiner of the doctoral thesis on which the monograph was based, I knew it was more than a history of professional women. Indeed, the higher education of women—the education that led to their professional possibilities—was a central theme. Yet I also knew this would be no institutional history of women and higher learning, connected as this topic was for Alison Mackinnon to women's personal and collective histories as child bearers and professional workers in the world.

Mackinnon's thesis connecting the higher education of women to fertility decline in the western world was already a *tour de force*; the study reviewed here is a rich and complex work that will surely become a classic. The strengths of *Love and Freedom* are many; I here emphasize three. The first is its comprehensive, comparative character. Although the core documentation is Australian, we are treated to an exploration of the histories of highly educated women living in several continents and more than a few (predominantly English-speaking) nations. A second strength is the study's interdisciplinary character. Mackinnon draws, with equal ease, on quantitative sources (for example, marriage and birth statistics), conventional archival materials (such as family papers), and literary documentation (women's novels, memoirs, and stories about their lives). Finally, this study is beautifully written and delightfully illustrated. Mackinnon and her publisher are to be congratulated on a book that is both a wonderful read and visually attractive.

Mackinnon argues that in order to understand the demographic revolution, we should go beyond individual and household studies, or comparisons of aggregates that reflect entire populations, moving instead to "multi-level comparative studies" that draw on "aggregate data and individual data." She also notes that it is this kind of multi-level account that feminist historians and sociologists are now busily contributing to the field.

A sub-theme of this argument, perhaps, is implicit in Mackinnon's insistence on going beyond "real" lives to explore the lives that leap so vividly from the pages of women's literature. From the novel *Slow Dawning* by Eleanor Dark to the better known *For Love Alone* by Christina Stead, Mackinnon introduces us to Australian writers unafraid to confront some of

the more gut-wrenching issues late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women faced in their educational, working, and sexual lives. In an era when so much doubt was cast on the value of higher education for women, the very decision to go to university could be difficult. Then there was the question of marriage, a relatively new dilemma for women. To marry or *not* to marry? And what to do about sex? And work? These were deep problems for the heroines of the novels Mackinnon cites.

Nor are real lives absent from *Love and Freedom*. Its author has mined the autobiographies, biographies, and personal papers of the famous and the not-so-famous to illustrate her themes. The results are vital mini-portraits of the lives of individual educated women in Australia, the United States, and Britain. Here is Laura Fowler, aged 17, writing to her brother Jim about her educational ambitions in 1885:

What do you say Jim? I wish you could write and tell me as soon as you have made up your mind. Would you like your sister to be a B.Sc.?

Jim, not untypical of his period, was outraged at the idea. Despite her brother's opposition, Laura Fowler continued with her studies to become the first woman to graduate in medicine at the University of Adelaide. Mackinnon's readers also encounter Margaret Mead, recalling the feelings of an entire generation of educated women, as she had experienced them:

We belonged to a generation of young women who felt extraordinarily free—free from the demand to marry unless we chose to do so, free to postpone marriage while we did other things....We laughed at the idea that a woman could be an old maid at the age of twenty-five, and we rejoiced at the new medical care that made it possible for a woman to have a child at forty.

Mackinnon's major argument is her interpretation of the connections between fertility decline and educated women's individual and collective search for a cluster of privileges, rights, and freedoms unavailable to many women prior to their admission to universities (which in most places means the latter decades of the nineteenth century). These included access not only to higher education but to professional training and, perhaps most importantly, to the independence that came with professional employment. Quantitative data from South Australia demonstrate that the first generations of university-educated women married less often and later than other women typically did. Uniquely, Mackinnon has also been able to trace these South Australian university women in their later lives, to discover that even those who did marry limited their fertility. The individual stories that Mackinnon presents back up and contextualize this finding.

But to present her argument this simply is to do Alison Mackinnon a disservice, for hers is a study in complexity. It is also a study that draws knowledgeably, but unobtrusively and in language we can all understand, on theorists who have grappled with related themes. How are we to understand

power relations in and around women's lives, in their connections to each other, to the men in their lives and to their families, to larger institutions, and to the state? From Foucault to Dorothy Smith, the insights of scholars who have considered such questions are brought to bear on the decision-making of educated and professional women as they sought to construct lives including love and freedom, intimate relations, and economic independence. Perhaps, in the end, only a few could achieve these goals over a lifetime, and those few were members of a class that could afford to educate its daughters to advanced levels. Few in number though they were, Mackinnon argues, these women nevertheless provided a blueprint for feminist women of later generations.

Two more points are worthy of note. For those embarking on the study of historical demography the early chapters, especially chapter 3, "Sexuality and Reproduction: Narratives of Demography and Dissent," provide excellent summaries (and critiques) of the different approaches that characterize explorations of fertility decline in the western world. Here Mackinnon makes her argument for an interdisciplinary approach that includes women instead of rendering their desires and motives invisible. Her later chapters demonstrate the force of this contention.

Second, Mackinnon does not leave her readers in historical limbo, but moves in a final chapter to the recent past and the present, in order to explore the stories of late twentieth-century women and those now on the threshold of the new millennium. There is much food for thought in this brief account of our current dilemmas, in an era where choice is less between intimacy and independence than between child-rearing and increasingly professional roles, the latter taken almost for granted by most educated women.

But once again, this is to simplify Mackinnon's discussion. As she reminds more than once, hers is not a story with only one strand. "Difference matters." At the same time, there has undoubtedly been a major change in attitude from the turn-of-the-century to the present in what we loosely call the western or post-industrial nations. The "old stereotype of the unattractive bluestocking brandishing an umbrella" has disappeared to be replaced with that of "the designer-clad professional woman wielding her personal credit card." This is but one element of a shift that has brought complicated choices to many young women as they approach the year 2000. One point is clear, however. Those with higher education will have more choices, just as they had in the past. How desirable or helpful some of those choices are is of course another question.

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