

In Memoriam: Alison Prentice 1934–2021

Professor Alison Prentice died on June 25, 2021, in Victoria, BC. She will be remembered as a path-breaking feminist historian; a prolific researcher, writer, and editor; an outstanding teacher and generous mentor; and dear friend to many. She will be greatly missed.

Alison was born in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1934 and moved with her family to Canada in 1939. She earned her BA in history at Smith College, her teaching certificate at the Ontario College of Education, and her MA (1958) and PhD (1974) at the University of Toronto. She completed the latter while raising two sons, teaching history and French in Toronto secondary schools, and working as a teaching assistant at the University of Toronto and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), then as a lecturer, later as an assistant professor at Atkinson College, York University. While at Atkinson, Alison developed and taught one of the first university courses in Canada on women's history. When she moved to the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in 1975, she developed and taught courses in the history of education to several generations of graduate students, including path-breaking courses that posed feminist questions of education and brought the experiences of women as teachers and students to the centre of scholarly inquiry. In addition to supervising twenty-four doctoral and twenty-one master's students, she served on several dozen thesis committees before she retired in 1998. Many of Alison's graduate students have gone on to make significant contributions to the history of education in Canada and internationally.



Throughout Alison's impressive career, her interests in the history of education were closely linked to her focus on women and gender relations. Thus, she was the founding head of OISE's Centre for Women's Studies in Education, working closely with a team of researchers and colleagues on several studies and publications, including the Canadian Women's History Project, which generated *Canadian Women: A History* (co-authored with Paula Bourne, Gail Cuthbert Brandt, Beth Light, Wendy Mitchinson, and Naomi Black). Now in its third edition, this book is widely used in Canadian university classrooms. The two volumes of *The Neglected Majority: Essays in Canadian Women's History* (co-edited with Susan Mann Trofimenkoff) as well as *Pioneer and Gentlewomen of British North America* (co-edited with Beth Light) made important contributions to Canadian women's history. Alison's scholarly passion to promote a more inclusive and interdisciplinary view of history extended beyond university classrooms to include elementary and secondary schoolteachers, public historians, community-based settings (such as museums, libraries, and galleries), and other informal networks of learning. This led her to co-found the Ontario Women's History Network (OWHN) in 1990.

Alison not only excelled in her own research and publications, but throughout her career, she consistently worked to collaborate with and nourish the work of others. In organizations such as the Canadian History of Education Association, the Canadian Historical Association, and the Ontario Women's History Network, she took every opportunity to conduct collaborative research, to co-author and co-edit books, and to organize conference sessions with colleagues and students. She was an active member of the Canadian Committee on Women's History (now the Canadian Committee on Women's and Gender History), affiliated with the Canadian Historical Association.

From the outset of her career, Alison's work had a significant scholarly impact. When it was first published in 1977 as *The School Promoters: Education and Social Class in Mid-Nineteenth Century Upper Canada*, her doctoral thesis became an instant classic in the revisionist history of Ontario education. Other publications brought social history to broad education questions, including two books co-authored or co-edited with Susan E. Houston: *Family, School and Society in Nineteenth Century Canada* (1975) and *Schooling and Scholars in Nineteenth Century Ontario* (1988). *Schooling and Scholars* was awarded the Canadian Association for Foundations in Education Book Prize in 1992.

It was perhaps through her many publications focusing on women teachers, women historians, and women in the professions that Alison was best known among historians in Canada and internationally. Thus, during the early 1980s, she published several chapters and articles on women teachers with the late Marta Danylewycz, and in 1991, she co-edited *Gender and Education in Ontario: An Historical Reader* with Ruby Heap. The same year she published an international collection of papers, *Women Who Taught: Perspectives on the History of Women and Teaching* (co-edited with Australian historian Marjorie Theobald). A few years later, Alison co-edited *Education into the Twenty-First Century: Dangerous Terrain for Women?* with Swedish historian Inga Elgqvist-Saltzman and Australian historian Alison Mackinnon. Each of these publications, along with numerous articles, book chapters, and talks drew

attention to the complexities of gendered experiences of education and the gendered organization of teachers' work and lives.

In the mid-1990s, Alison turned her interests towards the education of women in the professions, including the experiences of women in physics and history. Again she worked collaboratively with colleagues to stimulate debate and research and to bring work to publication. A book on women historians, *Creating Historical Memory: English-Canadian Women and the Work of History*, published in 1997, was co-edited with Beverly Boutilier. A collection of papers on women's professional work, *Challenging Professions: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Women's Professional Work*, was co-edited with Elizabeth Smyth, Sandra Acker, and Paula Bourne, and published in 1999.

Alison was made a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1998. While she was pleased that her scholarship was recognized, she wrote a letter to the society to complain about their use of the term "fellow" in doing so. Her outstanding contributions were further recognized in 2013, when she became a member of the Order of Canada. She received honorary doctorates from the University of Guelph and Western University, and awards from many associations, including the Canadian Historical Association, the Canadian Association of Foundations of Education, and the Canadian History of Education Association. The Ontario Historical Society established the Alison Prentice Award for the best book in women's history, first awarded in 1998. In 1990, Alison, along with her co-authors of *Canadian Women: A History*, received Women of Distinction Awards from the Toronto YWCA for the writing of this text.

Well into retirement and after she moved to Victoria, BC, Alison maintained her involvement in networks of historians and scholars, and she actively continued her historical research, publishing more than a dozen articles, book chapters, and reviews. Alison and her husband, Jim, were Quakers, activists for social justice, and passionate environmentalists. They spent much of their time outdoors and were avid canoeists, sailors, and skiers, as well as welcoming hosts in Toronto and Victoria, at Collingwood, ON, and on Cedar and Lasqueti Islands. In 2020, Alison published *Adventures with Jim*, a memoir created from Jim's collection of letters, journal entries, and photographs. It is a beautiful testament to their long life together, and to lives lived with compassion and adventure.

As her student, colleague, and friend Elizabeth Smyth wrote: "Always humble, caring and thoughtful, Alison paired a brilliant mind with a compassionate personality. She was a legend. She was a star." Alison was also a very determined activist. One thing she felt strongly about was Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID). When her struggles with Parkinson's disease became increasingly unbearable this past spring she decided that the time had come for her to prepare her exit. In a *Globe and Mail* article about her life, her son Douglas reflected on her decision: "She told me it was not only okay, but she kind of hoped I would tell all and sundry after the fact her reasoning for choosing MAID. Basically she didn't want people to be afraid of MAID." As one of us mused, by mentioning this here, "this might stretch her activism just that much further...."

Alison was predeceased by her son, Matthew, and her husband, Jim Prentice, who was a physicist at the University of Toronto. She leaves her son Douglas and two grandsons, Theo and Guthrie, extended family, and a wide circle of friends and colleagues. Those who wish to send condolences or memories to Alison's family can address them to her son Doug.

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The Ontario Historical Society has established the Alison Prentice Award Trust Fund in her honour, dedicated entirely to granting a cash prize annually to the winner of the Alison Prentice Award for the best book on Canadian women's history. If you would like to make a charitable donation to this trust, you can either send an e-transfer to: payment@ontariohistoricalsociety.ca; pay by credit card (call 416-226-9011); or send a cheque payable to Ontario Historical Society, 34 Parkview Avenue, Willowdale, ON M2N 3Y2. Please indicate "Alison Prentice Award Trust Fund" for any payment method. All donations over ten dollars will receive a tax receipt. If you would like further information or have any questions about the award or the trust fund, please feel free to contact Rob Levery (rlevery@ontariohistoricalsociety.ca).

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