

Women's History at Acadia University

Margaret Conrad

Volume 33, numéro 2, spring 2004

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad33_2for02

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Conrad, M. (2004). Women's History at Acadia University. *Acadiensis*, 33(2), 68–73.

FORUM

Celebrating the Origins and Teaching of Women's History at Atlantic Provinces Universities: A Symposium

The idea for “Celebrating the Origins and Teaching of Women's History at Atlantic Provinces Universities: A Symposium” grew out of a conversation over lunch at the 2003 CHA conference in Halifax. At the Canadian Committee on Women's History (CCWH) meeting a question was raised about the continuing relevance of that group. Since one of the three young women I was lunching with was Lisa Chilton, the newly appointed Atlantic representative to that body, I raised the question about the future of the CCWH. There was general agreement among my young colleagues that networking – one of the longtime purposes of the CCWH – was still both necessary and valuable for women entering the field. But, we concluded, developing an active and dynamic network among women scattered across such a vast country – or even among women in our own region – posed significant challenges that widespread access to e-mail and internet discussion groups have not adequately addressed. My three companions pointed enviously at the recently expanded cluster of women historians at UNB. When I mentioned that, in the long-ago past when I was Atlantic representative for the CCWH, I had always thought that I should organize a meeting of scholars and others interested in promoting the study of women's history in the region, they were enthusiastic about the idea. So I rashly said that I would talk to my high-powered women colleagues – all five of them – when I got back to Fredericton and see what we could do. “Celebrating the Origins and Teaching of Women's History at Atlantic Provinces Universities: A Symposium” was the result.

GAIL CAMPBELL

Note: The following papers were revised by their authors for publication.

Women's History at Acadia University

THE FIRST COURSE IN WOMEN'S HISTORY AT Acadia was taught in the 1974-75 academic year by Lois Valley.¹ In the Acadia University *Calendar* for that year, it is listed as “History 220: History of Women: A Survey of the History of Women in Europe and North America”. It followed quickly – and a whole lot more easily – on the heels of an Interdisciplinary Studies course, “IDST 310: Woman in the Modern World”. Taught in the 1973-74 academic year, IDST 310 was a first at Acadia in two respects: the first course to focus on the topic of women and the first credit course to carry the mysterious designation “interdisciplinary”. The course was coordinated by Lois Valley, with psychologist Lorette Toews and myself as “chief monitors”. To give us something else to do, Lois Valley and I were both members of a collective that planned and launched *Atlantis* in 1974-75. That the two female historians at Acadia were central to these developments is a testimony to the importance of the

¹ I want to thank Paula Chegwidde, Barry Moody, Donna Smyth, Lois Valley-Fischer and Leigh Whaley for their help in tracking down information on this topic.

discipline of history for much of what was accomplished in the academy in the early years of the women's movement.

Gail Campbell's request that I reflect on the development of women's history at Acadia sent me to my personal archives which for most of my life is exceedingly thin on matters academic. For instance, I had to e-mail my former colleague Barry Moody to find out when I began teaching the "History of Women in Canada". Fortunately, the background to IDST 310 and History 220 is better documented. When the plans were being laid for IDST 310, I was in Toronto taking courses for my doctoral degree. I had begun teaching at Acadia in 1969 with only an M.A. in history and it was fast becoming clear that a Ph.D. was necessary if I wanted to secure tenure. During the winter and spring of 1973, Lois Valley kept me informed by phone and letter about the progress of IDST 310 through the bureaucratic processes: curriculum committee, faculty and senate. I have saved these records as well as the committee meeting agendas, press releases and outlines that make up the paper trail for this course.

When I arrived in Toronto in the summer of 1972, women's studies was making great strides in the city. Natalie Zemon Davis and Jill Ker Conway had taught their influential course "History 348: Topics in the History of Women" at the University of Toronto for the first time in 1971-72, the Canadian Women's Educational Press had been launched in February 1972, and not far away, at the University of Waterloo, Margrit Eichler had founded the *Canadian Newsletter of Research on Women*. I attended a series of evening lectures on women at the University of Toronto in the fall of 1972 and sent a bibliography that I had gleaned from one of the lectures to Lois Valley, who acknowledged it in a letter to me on 19 February 1973. In the same letter, Lois noted that the outline for IDST 310 had been quite favourably received by the curriculum committee chaired by David Stiles and that two or three departments were prepared to accept the course as a credit toward the major (ultimately, Home Economics and Sociology would do so and recognition must be given to Virginia Campbell, Dean of Home Economics, and James Shrag, head of the Sociology Department, for having the courage to support our controversial initiative).

Lois informed me that she was not planning to ask the History Department to recognize the course for credit, despite the fact that the outline included a heavy dose of history. Our head of the History Department and Dean of Arts, Harry MacLean, was less than enthusiastic about the women's movement and opposed our efforts to get women's studies into the curriculum. As an untenured member of the department I was vulnerable. Nevertheless, Lois hoped I would not be influenced by MacLean's negativity. She continued:

At this stage it would be important to know if you are interested in participating. If you are, perhaps you would like to do part of the history section. Don't feel that I am pressuring you. I know you will be busy next year so feel free to say "yes" or "no" as you choose. But if you are interested please let me know and also Harry [MacLean] because he will have to give his approval. My impression is that he is very relieved not to have a proposal for a full course [in history] and therefore he accepts this compromise.

I answered that I was indeed interested in participating in the course with the result

that, on 10 March, Lois penned another letter to me, with a more specific request:

At this time I am audacious enough to ask for a further commitment from you. I am willing to act as co-ordinator, i.e., carry on with the administrative duties, etc., but I do not feel that I can take on the responsibility as well for attending all the seminars. Therefore, I have suggested that in addition to a co-ordinator there be 2 chief monitors – one for each term – Lorette Toews has accepted the duty for the first term – the job would be to take on a commitment to attend all the seminars for that term and to participate in the discussions in such a way as to facilitate integration of the course. . . .

We will need a short reading list for each topic. Can you oblige by next Friday for your topic. . . .

Two months later (20 May 1973), Lois wrote to tell me that the course had passed faculty and senate scrutiny but not without opposition. Harry MacLean had spoken out against it in faculty, where “there were only 3 votes against it,” but there was more opposition in senate, where, Lois noted, “of course only Virginia [Campbell] was there to defend it”. The fact that this was the first interdisciplinary course to be offered for credit at Acadia meant that there was opposition not only to the content but also to the structure of the new course. Lois recently informed me that IDST 310 is still the only course at Acadia brought to the curriculum committee and faculty by an individual faculty member. Subsequent interdisciplinary courses were taken through the system by the appropriate dean.

Without Lois’s tireless lobbying, and her coaching of Virginia Campbell, I doubt we would have succeeded in getting the course on the books. There were, not surprisingly, some compromises. For example, we taught the course as overload. Not even the coordinator got course relief, and this at a time when some of us were teaching four full courses a year. No wonder Lois began turning her impressive energies toward unionization of the faculty in 1975!

Meanwhile, I was living in la-la land, attending classes, making contact with the founders of the Canadian Women’s Educational Press and corresponding with Margrit Eichler who, as an assistant professor at the University of Waterloo, was taking a leading role in launching the *Canadian Newsletter of Research on Women*. In a note accompanying my receipt for the *Newsletter* subscription, Margrit indicated that she would like to meet me if I had time “to visit the library here” (15 May 1973). Apparently, under Margrit’s watchful eye, Waterloo’s library was accumulating an impressive holding of sources on women.

Charged by these high-powered contacts, I wrote to Lois on 4 May suggesting that we publish the lectures from our proposed course. “I have been talking to the people at the Women’s Educational Press just around the corner from me”, I cheekily announced, “and they say that they would be happy to do it if I or one of us would edit it. . . . There is such a need for texts on women that anything sells”. I also noted that:

I just registered for a course on auto mechanics at the Women’s Place here. It was a toss-up between that and self defence. I finally decided that for the time being, at least at Acadia, a sharp tongue is still my best weapon and that

cars are my biggest problem. I have a new Vega and am determined to understand it better than I did my Cortina.

By the time I returned to Acadia in the summer of 1973, Lois had lined up seven female faculty members to take responsibility for the course (Carrie Fredericks, Donna Pree, Lethem Roden, Hilary Thompson, Lorette Toews, Lois Valley and myself) and convinced several other colleagues, some of them men (Gabriel Fischer, Herb Lewis and Ralph Winter), to volunteer as guest lecturers. Our impressive course outline was seven pages long. Few, if any, courses at Acadia up to that time had been so well prepared. In August Lois issued a press release announcing the course, which we hoped would attract some interest in the surrounding community as well as on campus. Our class was held in a three-hour time slot in the evening so that it would not conflict with our day-time teaching schedules and would be accessible to mature students with day jobs. On the first night (Thursday, 13 September), over 100 students, young and old, appeared in Room 215 of University Hall. Even some of the retired female Baptist missionaries who lived in Wolfville were among those packed into the room. Fearing that students might audit the course without paying the fee, the registrar, David Green, turned up to monitor events, probably another first for Acadia. We were livid about that surveillance and so was one of our wealthier supporters who offered to pay the audit fee for anyone who could not afford to do so. If we had not previously met with the Acadia President James Beveridge to ask that auditing fees be waved because the course was not funded by the university, we might have been spared this scrutiny!

IDST 310 was a happy blend of history and politics. It began with a cross-cultural comparison of women's role and status, covered attitudes toward women from ancient times to the present, and explored the experience of women in pre-industrial societies, the impact of industrialization on women and the rise of the women's movement as well as the specific experience of women in Canada. Other topics included sex differences, women in the labour force, the intellectual woman, women in English and French literature and the socialist "experiment" as it pertained to women. In addition to monitoring the presentations of my colleagues in 1973-74, I taught "Women in Canadian History" for which I had a long list of readings, including Catherine Cleverdon's *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada*, Nellie McClung's *In Times Like These* and various studies done for the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada. I even drew upon primary sources such as Nicolas Deny's account of his experiences in Acadia (1672) to provide information on Aboriginal women in Canada. I also collaborated with Lorette Toews to teach the class on "The Social Status of Women". For this topic Lorette and I produced a handout "Women in Canada: Myths and Realities" which makes interesting reading more than a quarter century later. Overall, the course was well received and is still being taught at Acadia.

Fresh from this triumph, Lois introduced her "History of Women" course in 1974. By this time, our male colleagues were beginning to realize that courses on women attracted students and they were annoyed that the History Department was getting no credit for the work that Lois and I were doing in IDST 310. While Harry MacLean was not particularly keen on History 210, he no doubt concluded that it was preferable to establish a stand-alone history course on women than to accept credit for an IDST course. Lois had boxed him in nicely. She remembers using Julia O'Faolain and Lauro

Martines, *Not in God's Image* and Susan Bell, *Women: From the Greeks to the French Revolution* as her texts.² Eventually, I also taught this course and, with *Canadian Women: A History* by Alison Prentice and her colleagues available by 1988, I finally taught "Canadian Women's History" in the 1993-94 academic year. In the winter semester 2003, Leigh Whaley taught for the first time her new seminar course "History 3503: History of Ideas about Women".

While we never got around to publishing our lectures in IDST 310, which of necessity contained original research, we nevertheless continued to believe that it was important to communicate the feminist perspectives that were gradually transforming all academic disciplines. Lorette and I eventually published our "Women in Canada: Myths and Realities" handout in a local religious magazine called the *Second Mile* (December 1977). In 1974, writer and literary scholar Donna Smyth was hired by the English Department and she conceived the idea of *Atlantis*.³ We began putting a proposal together for the journal in the fall of 1974 and it was launched the following year, which was International Women's Year and the year that the Canadian Committee on Women's History (CCWH) was established at the Canadian Historical Association meetings. The first issue of *Atlantis* included a piece on "Women and the Revolution in Portugal" by Lois and her new husband Gabriel Fischer as well as articles by well-known feminist historians such as Deborah Gorham, Margaret Gillett, Veronica Strong-Boag and Jennifer Stoddart. In short order, I was able to add a "Canadian Women's Archives" section to the journal where I published some of the primary sources by women that I found so fascinating.

The networks forged in developing IDST 310 and producing *Atlantis* served us well in fending off insults and career hurdles at Acadia and elsewhere. When we were awarded a grant from the Canada Council to support the journal, a number of our colleagues were outraged, but money talks and we gradually gained grudging respect for making the project a success. Our courage in pursuing ambitious goals also gave us power to take on other challenges. I nominated Lorette Woolsey-Toews (women kept changing their names in this decade) for a position on the seven-member Task Force on the Status of Women in Nova Scotia, established in 1975, and Lorette and I worked together with Donna Smyth and others to produce a report on the status of women at Acadia (1978).

Lois Vallye-Fischer became Dean of Arts in 1982, a position she held until 1995. Under her leadership, the interdisciplinary programme in Women's Studies, a perennial but fragile flower, continued to evolve. "Woman in the Modern World" was gradually taken under the protective wing of the Sociology Department which as early as 1974 agreed to use its next faculty appointment to hire someone who would coordinate IDST 310 and receive credit for doing so. Although the first appointment, Maureen Archer (later Maureen Baker), left in 1977, she was followed by Paula Chegwidden who played a major role in keeping IDST 310 on the rails and in developing a Women's Studies major option that was finally approved in the spring

2 Deborah Gorham, "Making History: Women's History in Canadian Universities in the 1970s", in Beverly Boutilier and Alison Prentice, eds., *Creating Historical Memory: English-Canadian Women and the Work of History* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), p. 282.

3 "Margaret Conrad in Conversation with Donna Smyth, Founding Editor of *Atlantis*", *Atlantis*, 25, 2 (Spring 2001), pp. 105-6.

of 1995. By that time there were enough courses focusing on women and gender to undertake this initiative. The fact that Lois was still Dean of Arts when the Faculty of Arts undertook a major overhaul of its offerings in 1993-94 meant that the approval process for the Women's Studies option went remarkably smoothly.

Looking back over three decades of women's history and Women's Studies, it is clear that much has been accomplished. In 2000 Linda Kealey and I edited the 21st anniversary issue of *Atlantis* (Fall 2000) which was devoted to exploring the impact of feminism on the writing of Canadian history. I could never have imagined in 1975 the sophistication of the articles we received a quarter of a century later. And so enthusiastic was the response to our call for papers that we had to spread them over two issues of the journal. While I am less convinced than our American sisters who, in the February 2000 issue of *The Women's Review of Books*, argued that women's history is now firmly rooted in the curriculum and in academic exchanges, I have no doubt that the field has transformed how historians understand the past. We, of course, have to remain vigilant. With public history increasingly driving the agenda, we cannot be complaisant. The federal government has recently funded two new museums, one devoted to military and the other to political history, neither of which will likely tell us much about why these two areas of human life in Canada remain dominated by a small number of men.

On a personal level, I can say that being part of a movement enriched my life as a historian. There are few greater academic satisfactions than being involved in developing a new field of inquiry, especially one that echoes so loudly in public life.

MARGARET CONRAD

Origins of Women's History at Mount Saint Vincent University

AT PRESENT, THE MOUNT SAINT VINCENT Department of History boasts the broadest range of undergraduate courses available in women's and gender history available at Maritime universities. Four units of women's and gender history courses provide a broad range from which students may choose. Not only does the Department of History offer surveys in Canadian, U.S. and European women's history, but faculty members also mount special theme classes in gender history on a regular basis. A course cross-listed with Women's Studies titled "Women, War, and Peace" is offered through the History Department as well.

As we appreciate today, the expansion of arts programs in colleges and universities across the country in the late 1960s and early 1970s, combined with the feminist ferment of this era, encouraged scholars in many disciplines to pay attention to women. Founded in 1873 as a ladies academy by the Sisters of Charity expressly to educate women, the Mount transmogrified rapidly from the small Roman Catholic college it had become by the 1960s to a co-educational public university during this heady era for post-secondary education. At the helm from 1968 until 1973 was Sister Catherine Wallace, who in 1968 became not only the president of the Mount but also the first woman to serve on the board of the Associations of Universities and Colleges in Canada (AUCC). Wallace, with a Ph.D. in literary criticism from Saint John's University in New York City, went on to chair the AUCC Standing Committee on the