

Origins of Women's History at Mount Saint Vincent University

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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

Status of Women in 1971-72 and was appointed, in 1973, to the federal Advisory Council on the Status of Women. In 1973 Catherine Wallace also became the first woman president of the AUCC.¹

Archival records confirm what Mount faculty members who worked closely with Catherine Wallace during these years remember about this strong-minded individual: the new president was determined to advance the education of women and to increase their influence in the public realm; in this context, she became the driving force behind the establishment of women's studies as an interdisciplinary focus at the Mount. According to classicist Wayne Ingalls, who was Assistant Academic Dean during Catherine Wallace's presidency and is now a tenured member of the Mount's History Department, she was "far ahead of the faculty". Mindful that the Royal Commission on the Status of Women Report of 1970 recommended the need for scholarly study about women, President Wallace, according to Ingalls, "ordered" departments to appoint faculty members to organize and teach an interdisciplinary course, "Perspectives on Women". While some faculty members resented President Wallace's imperious style and her command that instructors for the course work gratis, overtime, to mount it, a select few nonetheless pushed ahead and offered "Perspectives on Women" for the first time in the fall of 1973. Rosemarie Sampson, professor of psychology at the Mount, recalls that "Perspectives on Women" attracted many students; the instructors assigned to teach the course in a modified team-teaching format convened the class in the large Mount auditorium in the Seton building to accommodate the large enrollment.²

The content of the two-semester "Perspectives on Women" course was firmly grounded in the study of history. This course provided the foundation for the creation of the first minor in Women's Studies at a Maritime university, a programme of study that was approved in 1979. At the same time, this course encouraged the concomitant development of specialized, disciplinary-based courses that focused on women and became integral to the evolving interdisciplinary Women's Studies programme at the Mount. The 1973-74 syllabus for "Perspectives on Women" reveals that in the first

1 Sister Catherine Wallace Papers, Sisters of Charity Archives, Mount Saint Vincent Motherhouse, Halifax, Nova Scotia. I wish to thank Christine Eisan for her conscientious archival research, her careful use of oral interview method and her thoughtful observations relating to the genesis of the Women's Studies program at the Mount in the 1970s. I extend my appreciation to Wayne Ingalls, Sister Margaret Malloy, David Monaghan, and Rosemarie Sampson for agreeing to speak with Christine about their recollections of the inception of the Women's Studies at the Mount. Sister Theresa Corcoran was kind enough to answer my questions about the development of women's history courses at the Mount through e-mail correspondence; her comments proved invaluable. I also wish to thank Wendy Mitchinson, who, in a delightful telephone conversation, helped give me a sense of what it felt like to be a young scholar who knew she was making a difference: in the classroom teaching women's history and in the archives researching women's history. It was also very kind of Gillian Thompson to present my thoughts – shared with her via telephone – on the origins of women's history at the Mount to the symposium participants on women's history origins in the Maritimes held at the University of New Brunswick in the autumn of 2003. I will always remember when this conference occurred, and why I could not be present: this gathering took place just one week after Hurricane Juan hit Halifax, my town, with shocking force, altering in dramatic fashion and for years to come our beautiful Maritime "city of trees".

2 Notes on oral interviews with Wayne Ingalls and Rosemarie Sampson prepared by Christine Eisan, September 28, 2003; Wayne Ingalls to Frances Early, e-mail message, 2 September 2003.

semester faculty members representing the disciplines of history, English literature, psychology, sociology, anthropology, religious studies and political studies provided guest lectures. Sister Catherine Wallace launched the course with two introductory lectures. In the first lecture President Wallace discussed the ideals and personalities, past and present, that have influenced attitudes towards women, and in the second presentation she provided an assessment of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women Report and relevant international reports on women's roles in diverse societies. The History Department's contribution during the first semester comprised two lectures by three historians, Janina Konczacki, Alex Fried and Hugh Wallace. Their subject matter, "What role have women played in history?" was identified in the syllabus as an examination of the role of women in selected historical periods including Elizabethan England, 18th-century France and 19th-century Russia; women's role in the exploration of the Canadian Arctic was also presented. In the second semester, the course was divided into its component parts with students choosing their class section according to discipline.

The second-semester history course offering for "Perspectives on Women" was taught by Sister Theresa Corcoran, who had just completed her dissertation at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. on the life of progressive reformer Vida Dutton Scudder under the direction of historian Dorothy Brown. Theresa Corcoran was thus well prepared to teach this class in women's history and chose as her theme "The Feminist Movement". Corcoran's syllabus describes the course's aims and scope:

[The course] will consider the various aspects of the feminist movement as it developed in the United States and then, through assigned readings and independent research, will compare and contrast the situation of women in Canada during corresponding periods. The purpose of the course is to study the emergence of the feminist movement as a social force, to consider the counter-forces it met to rediscover and reinterpret women's traditional role and the alternate patterns proposed, in order to evaluate the successes and failures of the movement. Such a background should provide fuller understanding of the contemporary movement and foster an awareness of the individual contribution each must make if feminism is to become a broad-based movement aimed at creating real social change.

The assigned texts were also listed: Catherine Cleverdon, *The Women Suffrage Movement in Canada*; Eleanor Flexner, *A Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States*; Margaret Labarge, et al., *Cultural Tradition and Political History of Women in Canada*; and William O'Neill, *Everyone Was Brave: A History of Feminism in America*. The syllabus also indicated that primary sources would be placed on library reserve and that the Mount library's "History of Women Collection" was available on microfilm for perusal.³

3 The "History of Women Collection" is impressive, representing all printed materials on women held in the libraries of the prestigious "Seven Sisters" colleges in the United States. A second women's history microfilm and microfiche archive located in the Mount library, the Gerritsen Collection, constitutes a body of primary and secondary materials primarily dealing with European women's history. Other microfilm collections on women, such as the records of the U.S. section of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, have been acquired over the years, and, since

The sense of the university community was that the “Perspectives on Women” course should be taught on a regular basis, and instructors of psychology, sociology, and English literature agreed to keep the course running even though this commitment usually involved overload teaching. Instructors in other disciplines decided that they were spread too thin in terms of their teaching responsibilities to maintain their involvement in the “Perspectives on Women” course. The History faculty, housed for a time in a divisional structure that included philosophy and political studies, after 1974 chose to opt out of offering a second-semester component for “Perspectives on Women”. Instead, individual members elected to prepare new courses in women’s history, or they devised new courses that aimed to integrate women’s history into the broader framework of historical narrative and interpretation.

Three members of the History Department were instrumental in creating women’s history courses at the Mount between 1976 and 1981. Theresa Corcoran, a specialist in U.S. history with a Ph.D. dissertation on women’s history, as noted above, developed a course on the history of U.S. feminism that was approved by the Mount Senate in 1976 (in 1979, this course was renamed “Women’s History: the American Experience”). At this time, Wendy Mitchinson, a Ph.D. candidate in Canadian history who was researching women’s reform organizations in the late-19th century, held a two-year term contract as a temporary replacement for a faculty member on leave of absence. At the request of the History Department, Mitchinson created a survey course entitled “Canadian Women in Historical Perspective”. The proposals that Corcoran and Mitchinson authored and submitted as a package for university approval used the same language to explain their rationale for introducing the courses. These reasons included the “importance of the feminist movement itself and the role of women in the development of society”. Their proposals also stated that “if Mount Saint Vincent University intended to assert itself as a university strongly interested in the education of women”, then it was important to make students aware of the positive role women had played in history. Corcoran and Mitchinson linked the development of women’s history courses to the women’s movement of their time as well as to the Mount’s mission as an institution devoted primarily to the education of women. In like manner, Janina Konczacki, a historian of sub-Saharan Africa who also taught European history, understood that the time had come to stress women’s history in the Mount’s History programme. In 1976, the same year Theresa Corcoran and Wendy Mitchinson proposed their respective women’s history courses, Konczacki prepared a two-semester course on the social and cultural history of France from 1500 to 1914. Included in the course description was a statement emphasizing the need to focus on women’s experiences in courses not specifically designated as “women’s history” courses: “The social, economic, religious, literary, and intellectual involvement of women during the periods of the 16th to the 19th century will be analyzed, bringing out the specific factors which affected the

the 1980s, a Petro Canada endowed fund for purchasing books on women has helped to maintain an up-to-date women’s studies collection at the Mount. All materials pertaining to the Perspectives on Women course are found in Mount Senate Records located in Mount Saint Vincent University Archives (MSVUA).

status, image, and role of women". In 1981, Janina Konczacki introduced a two-semester survey course in European women's history.⁴

By 1982, the Mount's History programme was offering survey courses in Canadian, U.S. and European women's history. These courses fit in well with the burgeoning interdisciplinary Women's Studies programme. By the mid-1980s, it was possible for students to major in Women's Studies at the Mount, and women's history courses provided attractive "women emphasis" electives within the interdisciplinary bachelors degree program in Women's Studies. Frances Early joined the History Department in 1981; a specialist in U.S. social history, she became active in promoting the interdisciplinary major in Women's Studies. An historically focused course entitled "Women, War and Peace", designed and taught by Early for the first time in 1988, became a Women's Studies and History cross-listed offering in 1996. In 1991 Frances Early created two half-unit and one full-unit upper-level courses, "Selected Topics in Women's History"; in 1997 this set of courses was renamed "Gender in Historical Perspective". The women's history and gender history courses currently available as electives at the Mount may also be counted towards a minor or major in History or in Women's Studies.⁵

In closing, let us consider a telling incident Sister Theresa Corcoran recently related to me. In 1970, while a Ph.D. student, Corcoran traveled to Boston to attend the annual meeting of the American Historical Association. She was thrilled to hear one of the pioneers of women's history deliver a stirring and thought-provoking paper:

Gerda Lerner gave a most interesting talk. I do not recall the topic, but it certainly was among the first of such papers. [There] was standing room only, largely men in those days. As we were leaving the room I heard one gentleman commenting to his friend: "I still don't know what they want".⁶

I would like to suggest that this question of what historians of women "want" has been answered in interesting and impressive ways over a span of more than thirty years. Might those of us engaged in developing women's history as a field of serious inquiry, notably we who have promoted women's history in our respective institutions across the Maritimes, take a moment to rest on our laurels? Yes, indeed!

FRANCES EARLY

4 See Senate Records, MSVUA, for documentation on the history courses discussed in this paragraph.

5 Senate Records, MSVUA, and History Department Minutes, MSVUA.

6 Theresa Corcoran to Frances Early, e-mail message, 10 September 2003. This session featuring pioneers in the field of women's history must have been impressive. Joining Gerda Lerner on the panel in which she spoke on "Woman's Rights and American Feminism" were Jo Freeman, "Origin, Structure and Ideas of the Women's Liberation Movement" and Alice Rossi, "Beyond Women's Liberation: The Human Condition Under Sex Equality". Ann Firor Scott chaired the panel and William O'Neill provided comments. See *American Historical Association Annual Meeting Program*, Boston, 1970, pp. 42-3. Thanks are extended to Sharon Tune, Assistant Director, Administration and Convention Director of the American Historical Association, for digging up this information on the session "Feminism – Past, Present, and Future" on quick notice.