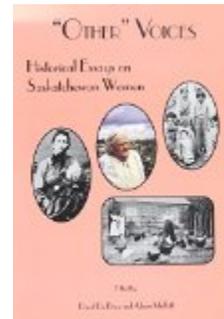


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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David DeBrou, Aileen Moffatt, eds. *Other Voices: Historical Essays on Saskatchewan Women*. Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1995. 166 pp. \$16.00 Canadian (paper), ISBN 978-0-88977-088-1.

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Women's history has made some interesting turns in the 1990s. Perhaps for this reason it is appropriate for a recent collection of articles on women's history to open with two historiographical essays. The first, written jointly by both editors, serves as the volume's introduction and offers a very brief overview on the development of women's history through the 1970s and 1980s. As the authors see it, there have been two paths to the study of women's history. The first, led by white, middle-class women scholars in the 1970s, managed to counter not inconsiderable reluctance and established gender as a legitimate mode of historical explanation in the 1980s. This initial path emphasized a distinct women's culture and drew upon the "separate spheres" ideology of a division between public and private (or male and female) histories. But in the last seven years or so, this first path has been crossed by a second path that emphasizes the diversity of women's history and challenges its sometimes "monotheistic" attachment to gender as an explanatory variable.

As the title of this volume suggests, Dave De Brou, Aileen Moffatt, and their collaborators sympathize with this second path. In the second historiographical piece, Moffatt hones in on the writing of women's pasts in the province of Saskatchewan on the Canadian Prairies and considerably elaborates on the position of the book. Saskatchewan women's history has emerged from the battles of the 1970s and veered off on a new, more inclusive, and more nuanced route that considers "separate spheres" an outmoded paradigm that falsely implies an air-tight division between public and private lives—and women's total exclusion from the former.

Despite its title, this book seems less about voice than

it is about identity. More specifically, this volume focuses on how identity is transmitted from the group to the individual. And its attention to the nuances between the ways in which different groups, be they social classes, ethnic, or language groups, affect the identities women share with one another. This attention makes the book appear to question the very notion of a unified women's history: by their gender and sex, women share many characteristics, but they are also divided by their ethnicity, nationality, class, language, and religion—as are men and as are children. However, rather than use this diversity to challenge women's history, this collection seeks to invigorate and strengthen it. For instance, Lesley Erickson's examination of the lives of Swedish immigrants reveals how Swedish culture mediated gender roles. Erickson examines the interplay of gender, ethnicity, and the physical, social, and economic environments of Saskatchewan to reveal that gender is one of many variables which contributes to shaping individual and group identities. Although this case looked at the specifics of a particular block settlement on North America's northwestern frontier, similar transmissions of identity from mother to daughter might plausibly be found elsewhere.

Thus, cultural position has divided women from one another. Nadine Small's examination of Saskatchewan's Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire during the Great War points to the efforts of affluent "Anglo-Saxons" to publicize women's place in the Empire and to strengthen the sentiments that bound women together around the Throne. But, at the same time, they sought to exclude poorer and lower-class women, as well as those not of "British stock," from the dialogue. The group's nativism was part and parcel of its imperialism. After all,

the IODE was founded to prepare women for the eventuality of service against “foreigners” in wartime. The Daughters of the Empire were particularly active during the Great War of 1914-18, knitting, holding meetings, surrendering their sons and husbands for state service, and educating the “less patriotic” public. These women saw in imperialistic patriotism the means to control and structure the communal identity emerging on the Prairie frontier. Yet, their imperialism, as expressed through Small’s subjects, seems mostly in accord with that of such male imperialists as George Grant. J. Castell Hopkins declared the IODE programme to be “precise and clear,”[1] in part because it reflected his own views on the best feminine roles in wartime. Although Small presents the Prairie Daughters as largely detached from their male counterparts, this interplay across the borders of gender and sex might have broadened her study and further enhanced our understanding of the deeply felt attachment to Empire held by many late-Victorians.

At the other end of the social scale, working-class women deeply resented interference in the management of their households. In particular, working-class women resisted state intrusion into their traditional prerogative of family care. Even when dependant on public assistance, such as during the Great Depression, they construed their role in independent terms. As Theresa Healey demonstrates, this was possible by manipulating the relief system to their liking. But when it was not possible, they showed little reluctance to turn to political resistance. Nonetheless, although Healey’s subjects willingly crashed through the barriers dividing the “separate spheres,” theirs was a Burkean resistance. They acted in defence of their traditional rights and roles in the face of outside (public) intrusion into their private affairs.

Of course, for the second path of women’s history to be successful, it must find legitimate historical sources. Small and Healey were able to glean their evidence from archival records because their inquiries turned around questions of importance to the state. Unfortunately, the voices of the excluded have all too often left little trace in public records. It is for this reason that many of the selections in this volume turn to the tools of oral history. Indeed, both Julie Dorsch’s and Jo-Anne Lee’s contributions rely almost exclusively on oral sources and quote at length from their subjects’ interviews. Oral history thus reveals itself to be an exciting tool for the recovery of history. It is exciting because it is of great importance in expressing the hidden, and even suppressed, experiences of women. But, as Anne McClintock has recently argued, oral history is both the outcome of power struggles

and the locus of those struggles. In other words, the production of history is a contest that cannot be isolated from the contexts of power from which it emerges.[2] Moreover, historians are becoming increasingly aware that memories, the basic data of oral history, aside from being subject to deeply personal and often emotional filtering, are also subject to the social environments from which *they* emerge.[3] Thus, social environments help shape individual memories and, as social environments change over time, so too will memories change over time. Even the same question might elicit widely divergent responses about the same experiences. And, it is debatable if the more immediate or the more reflective memory is the “valid” one. Oral history is a slippery fish indeed. But its production tends to play down these difficulties in favour of foregrounding the (artificial) purity of the narrator’s voice. This said, both cases cited above are strong pieces of oral history, and Lee’s close attention to post-structural theory goes a great distance in alleviating such concerns. Her interviews with three radicalized immigrant women suggest, not only a means to circumvent the din of the mainstream, but also how some women react to the politics of “othering.”

Overall, *Other Voices* is a mixed bag. While some of the pieces appear to be edited papers for a graduate seminar, others have clearly advanced beyond the classroom and begun to probe something quite important. But the real strength of the work lies in the editors’ ability to recognize the variety of the articles and turn it into an overarching theme. As Moffatt states (p. 24), the focus of this volume is female diversity. Indeed, this collection strives to resist the tendency to essentialize or universalize gender differences. “Diversity” is often employed statically, but one does not encounter such an understanding in this volume. Rather, we come face to face with the shifting boundaries of gender identity. The women’s history of Saskatchewan points to a process of identity formation and identity transference that is almost Gordian in its complexity. It is a lesson that should not be confined to scholars of women’s studies, but ought to be absorbed by all students of identity.

Notes:

[1]. J. Castell Hopkins, *Canadian Annual Review* (1914), p. 419.

[2]. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather* (London and New York, 1995).

[3]. See especially the renewed popularity of Maurice Halbwachs *Les Cadres sociaux de la memoire* (Paris, 1925,

1976).

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