It seems as if Canadian gender historians spend a lot of time reading urban history.[1] Perhaps that is why it was such a breath of fresh air to read Monda Halpern’s *And on That Farm He Had a Wife: Ontario Farm Women and Feminism, 1900-1970*. As Halpern points out, Canadian rural history has commonly been concerned with the Prairies and as a result, there are large gaps in our knowledge of rural and agrarian life elsewhere in Canada (p. 21). Beyond a simple description of life on the farm for Ontario women, this book has a clear mandate to challenge the perception that farm women were too busy and too conservative to join the ranks of feminists in Ontario. Halpern argues that “Ontario farm women were indeed feminist and that this feminism was more progressive than most of us would presume” (p. 3).

Halpern begins by positioning the study in a larger context. Borrowing from Naomi Black, Halpern differentiates between equity feminism, that which promotes equality with men because of similarities between women and men and is traditionally more political in nature, and social feminism, that which “unlike equity feminism, sought for women to remake, not simply fit into patriarchal systems and values and thus function as an expression of opposition to them.” Halpern’s thesis is that in rural Ontario social feminism thrived from 1900 until the 1970s. This statement challenges historians on two fronts. First, it challenges those who view farm women during this period as reformers but not as feminists, though Halpern fails to mention the work of Yolande Cohen who deals with this very question in Quebec.[2] Second, she is creating a new periodization. Historians who have looked at farming in Ontario have generally considered 1900-1950 to be the bridge between pioneer or traditional farming and the “new agriculture” that resulted from increased mechanization and specialization.[3] By situating her study around women rather than farming techniques, Halpern provides a new periodization that extended to the 1970s when second-wave feminism began making inroads into the farm women’s movement.

Working in a relatively unfamiliar area, Halpern addresses the gaps and silences that have traditionally existed in farm women’s history in Canada as well as some of the methodological difficulties she faced throughout her research. The seemingly simple question of identification is a case in point. For example, is a farm woman the wife of a farmer? Does that mean she has to be the owner of the farm or can she also be a manager of a farm? What about the daughters of farmers? Or does the term “farm women” refer specifically to women farmers? The next challenge is discovering who these women were. Certainly the census, which considered a woman a farmer only if she owned and operated the farm without husbands or fathers, does not provide a workable definition for the historian. In this book, Halpern defines farm women as the wives or unmarried adult daughters of farmers. Then there is the question of social class. What becomes clear as she develops this analysis is the invisibility of farm women in the history of Ontario. Halpern realizes that in this book she is only beginning the process of filling in some of these holes. If the reader is looking for the voices of black, aboriginal, Mennonite, or francophone women, they will not be found in this initial study. This is a history of “majority” farm women. As the first of its kind, Halpern views this study as a “crucial jumping off point from which scholars can pursue more nuanced treatments of the feminism of all farm women, including detailed consideration of their various racial,
religious, and ethnic backgrounds” (p. 24).

With the methodological and theoretical questions considered, Halpern then begins to sketch the lives of farm women in Ontario. Filled with memoirs and anecdotes, Halpern delves into the world of women’s experience on the farm. She explores the world of daily chores, both productive and reproductive, both in the home and on the farm, that filled the days of farm women. Halpern reveals the loneliness and isolation felt by many farm women who waited all week for the ritual of Sunday visiting. She surveys the fight for modern technology in the home by women and the patrilineal inheritance practices that often left single women destitute and homeless at the death of fathers. The overarching theme to these stories is that of gender inequality. Halpern argues that women did more than just complain about this inequality—they challenged the patriarchal structure of the farm in many ways. For some women challenging the gender inequality on the farm meant refusing to do certain chores; for others it meant divorce or refraining from marriage at all. In extreme instances, some women saw murder as the only way out. More common was the use of birth control by farm women who sought to limit their labor by limiting the number of children they had. When children grew up, many mothers encouraged their daughters to go to urban centers in order to seek out husbands who were not farmers or to pursue a career outside of farming such as teaching or nursing.

These challenges to the patriarchal conventions of the farm were generally executed on an individual level—until the advent of the domestic science movement and the Women’s Institute. While farm women had access to gatherings such as sewing groups and missionary circles, the purpose of these groups was largely social. The domestic science movement and the Women’s Institute, however, "forcefully took up the farm women’s cause, and transformed it into an organized and widespread lobby for change” (p. 51). The domestic science or home economics movement sought to promote the elevation of the quality of women’s lives by providing them with a female-centred education. This education integrated the “proper” central focus of a woman’s life, the home, with concepts of economics and science. Its main promoter, Adelaide Hoodless, argued that while it was commonly agreed that boys should receive manual training, it was only logical that girls should also receive a manual training but of a different kind. It is during this discussion that the line between rural and urban becomes rather fuzzy. Halpern traces the rise of the home economics movement both in urban and rural communities, without distinguishing fully between the two. Perhaps this was her intention. While the home economics movement was first integrated into the education system in Hamilton, the creation of the MacDonald Institute at the Ontario Agriculture College in Guelph and its subsequent popularity was the zenith of the movement’s efforts.

The Women’s Institute, which formed its first official branch in Stoney Creek in 1897, had the promotion of home economics as its sole purpose until the First World War. Meetings would consist of various members giving papers such as “Proper Food for Children,” “The Science of Keeping Clean in the Household,” “The Care of Milk in Warm Weather,” and “Economy and Household Waste,” followed by discussion. The provincial government supported the efforts of the WI hoping that it would increase the productivity and social conditions of the farm and, in turn, reduce female migration to urban centers. The WI had exclusively female membership, and emphasized the shared experience of women on the farm, at times locking the doors at meetings to make sure that men were physically excluded. The WI provided farm women with a form of agency that, Halpern argues, challenged the patriarchal inequality of agrarian life.

Halpern examines the fate of another farm women’s organization, the United Farm Women of Ontario. During the interbellum, the UFWO, which grew out of the United Farmers of Ontario, attempted to direct farm women’s focus away from the ideals of social feminism and towards those of equity feminism. Not only was the UFWO unsuccessful in securing the same number of long-term members as the WI but, realistically, most local branches of the UFWO more closely resembled the WI than the parent UFWO. When the question of integration with UFO men became a key issue for the UFWO, it lost popularity among farm women. Halpern argues that the quality of female separation supported by the WI may not have appealed to the leadership of the UFWO but it did appeal to the membership at large. The failure of the UFWO in 1943 was not, argues Halpern, due to the inherent conservatism of farm women but to its “commitment to equity feminism which invited the detrimental repudiation by UFO men, and undermined the self-sufficiency and values of rural women” (p. 105).

Throughout the twenty years following the Second World War, farms in Ontario were faced with substantial demographic changes, new agricultural practices, and fast-developing technology, all of which challenged the traditional role of women (and men) on the farm. Perhaps most challenging to farm women was the birth of
the second-wave feminist movement, which "condemned or ignored the experiences that shaped their lives" (p. 133). Halpern argues that despite all the upheaval, farm women and the Women's Institute maintained their social feminist agenda throughout the 1950s and 1960s. It was not until the 1970s that independent, activist, equity feminist organizations began to emerge in rural Ontario.

The strength of Halpern’s book is her ability to sketch the lives of farm women in Ontario, perhaps the reason I found her third chapter most rewarding. For those who viewed farm women’s lives as either too frenetic or too isolated for social or political activity, Halpern’s description should dispel some of these myths. Clearly Halpern has challenged current feminist theory. There will be some who readily support Halpern’s contention that farm women were feminist while others will find her analysis strained and unworkable. Some will disagree that non-equity feminism is feminism at all. Others will not be convinced of the feminist self-identification of Ontario farm women. Still others, like myself, will be uncomfortable with the generalization that all WI farm women in Ontario were social feminists, and might argue that certainly some were feminists while others more closely resembled anti-feminists. I applaud Halpern for taking a risk both in subject and in theory. She has raised questions that feminists and non-feminists alike ought to be discussing. Not only does the book ignite dialogue on its theoretical claims it also serves as a valuable contribution to the understanding of the daily lives of farm women in Ontario.

Notes

