Teaching Women's History at Memorial University

HISTORY IS ABOUT CHANGING INTERPRETATIONS AND approaches. What could be more appropriate as a subject than women's history which we can date back to at least the early-15th century with Christine de Pisan? From the women worthies enshrined in de Pisan's *Book of the City of Ladies* to the "querelle des femmes" that raged for centuries, to the women's history/gender history debates of recent times, there has been a long record of women's writing and writing about women that we have really only appreciated in the last three decades. And by "we" I mean those of us (at least in my generation) who in the late 1960s and early 1970s became aware that women had a history, one that was not reflected in contemporary, mainstream writing on history. Inspired also by my participation in the fledgling women's movement, first in Toronto in the late 1960s, then in the United States in the early 1970s where I worked as a children's librarian and read history on the side, I found my métier in this field – it seemed a perfect combination of my interests. This was no "academic" pursuit alone but rather women's history promised to bring together the intellectual and activist parts of my life. The intellectual discipline of history could build on my activism and vice versa. I could pursue contemporary issues tied to the women's movement in my historical research. Having reached this point, I gravitated to the pioneering history of women course taught by Natalie Davis and Jill Ker Conway at the University of Toronto in 1972, though Natalie had by then moved to Berkeley after the University of Toronto had declined to match the Berkeley offer. Planning to work with Jill Conway, I was disappointed to find out I could not as she moved on to become president of Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts in 1975, before I had taken my comprehensive doctoral exams, the cut-off point normally observed in academia for whether a student could continue with a supervisor. Thus I pursued a different topic and supervisor.

While a graduate student, I had become involved with the very early publication in women's history, *Women at Work: Ontario 1850 - 1930* (Toronto, 1974), a collection written and edited mostly by activists and/or fledgling historians. Five years later, while a doctoral student, I initiated and edited a collection also published by the Women's Press, *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Social Reform in Canada, 1880s-1920s* (Toronto, 1979). The year after, as I was working on my thesis, I received a call from Memorial University's head of the Department of History asking me if I would be willing to take a last-minute position in a few months time as a Visiting Professor, replacing Ruth Pierson who had gone to the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in Toronto. Forgoing a post-doctoral fellowship in a year in which my husband had a sabbatical from Dalhousie, we embarked in September 1980 for a year at Memorial – or so we thought. At the end of that year we were both offered positions – to replace Ruth Pierson and Douglas Hay who had both left for the bright lights of the big city of Toronto. This was my chance to introduce courses on women's history, a path opened by Ruth Pierson before she left Memorial.

Thus I began in the History Department teaching courses in which I had very little background, with two exceptions: a first-year course that used primary sources in whatever topic the professor wished to use; and a "special topics" course called "Women in North American Society" which I taught in fall 1980 and winter term

1982. Subsequently, I constructed more permanent courses based on the Davis/Conway model – an early modern (1500-1800) course and a modern history of women course (1800-present). These courses were first offered between 1982 and 1985 and I welcomed the opportunity to study the early modern period in Europe as I prepared to teach "Women in Western Society and Culture, I" which focused on both European and early American materials. The modern course "Women in Western Society and Culture, II" also required new learning, expanding my knowledge of Western European women's history and scholarship generally.

Women's Studies launched its programme in 1983, no doubt buoyed by the availability of courses in various arts departments, including my courses in history. Ironically, opposition came from departments such as English, which later furnished several key instructors for the core courses. Such was the skepticism about the programme that the dean of arts at the time approved the programme only as long as it cost him no budget! Subsequent deans realized that this would not work and found some money and a few appointments to keep Women's Studies alive. While never a department, the programme developed into a very viable minor programme and a masters degree. I have taught, though not for a very long time, core courses in Women's Studies at both levels. Women's history has always influenced my approach to women's studies and vice versa.

Perhaps one of the things that strikes me the most in reflecting on the teaching of women's history over the years is the increased interdisciplinarity required to teach in this field. The same could be said of history in general though I think this realization may well be more common in some areas of history than others (i.e., social history). But I am also reminded when teaching women's history that there are compelling reasons to be trained in a discipline, to know the debates and the historiographical tangles that have shaped that discipline.

Have we influenced our colleagues to change the way they teach and write? The record is mixed. In Canadian history we have had to contend with polemics from particular quarters that declare "we don't care" and that trivialize research in women's history. In contrast to this perspective, it is clear that the perception that women's history had achieved a recognized place in the curriculum had grown stronger in the ten years between my Canadian Historical Association survey of the status of women and of women's history in the profession, conducted in 1989, and the follow-up study of Ruby Heap and others in 1998.[1] Whether course content has changed in terms of the way historians teach the history of, to name a few examples, the Russian Revolution, the Cold War or the history of medicine, is perhaps an item for discussion. Have we made a difference? Perhaps that is a key question for us to debate. I'd like to think so.

LINDA KEALEY

1 Linda Kealey, "The Status of Women in the Historical Profession in Canada, 1989 Survey", *Canadian Historical Review*, 72, 3 (September 1991), pp. 370-88; Ruby Heap, "The Status of Women in the Historical Profession in Canada: Results of 1998 Survey", *Canadian Historical Review*, 81, 3 (September 2000), pp. 436-51.