Echoes of Those Now Silent: Canadian Women’s Associations as Learning Sites

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the “great transformation” of Canadian women’s self-understanding and identity in the period from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century. It argues that women’s individual and collective energy was canalized through the creation of voluntary associations and social movements. It also explores a select few of the persons and innovative pedagogical projects and experiments in communicative action. Civil society expands significantly to accommodate women’s needs, demands and dreams.

KEYWORDS
Civil Society Associations, Co-Operatives, Deliberative Democracy, Emancipation of Women, Female Suffrage, Feminist Humanism, Performative Pedagogy, Public Sphere, Social Gospel, Women’s Associations

1. INTRODUCTION
Visiting Parliament Hill in Ottawa is always a memorable experience. The languid gaze across the Ottawa River, the long view out towards the Gatineau Hills—surrounded by solid male Canadian Prime Ministers like Lester B. Pearson and John Diefenbaker. But unexpectedly, as one wanders around the back of the building, one’s stroll is abruptly stopped as one arrives at the “Ottawa Tea Party.” There one is confronted by five formidable bronzed larger-than-life statues. Five Albertan women—Emily Murphy, Nellie McClung, Irene Parlby, Henrietta Muir Edwards and Louise McKinney—invite us to join them for tea, cookies, talk and action. Nellie, holding an unfurled banner inscribed with the words “Women are persons”, stands nearby, beckoning us to pay attention. Listening closely and imaginatively, we can hear their urgent voices implores us to pay attention. Who are these women? Their imprecatory voices, now silent, still echo in our own time. But we must be receptive, open to actually hear the voices of those now departed. Others are no longer heard.

One of the tasks of the historian is to make certain that the voices of those now silent, of those often forgotten not only in their own time, but also in ours, are keep alive. The historian struggles against collective, societal forgetting. Historians who write with emancipatory intention search in the margins of our past for those who suffered deeply in their own time and are forgotten as history gets narrated from the victor’s standpoint. Until recently, Canadian political, social, educational and intellectual history has been narrated from a male horizon. This horizon screens out most of everyday life, and fixates upon the evolution of the nation state. It is history written by men about
other prominent men. This has also been largely true for the writing of adult learning and educational history. In this essay, then, I want to recover an array of women’s voices, associations, movements and pedagogical innovations and practices. Our attention will be limited to the period of the late 19th to roughly the mid-20th centuries and will focus mainly on Caucasian women.

My argument will be bold: first, in this tumultuous period in Canadian history, women experience a “great transformation” in self-understanding and identity; second, this transformation involves the release of immense learning energy as women move out from the “home” and invade public spheres previously forbidden to them; third, women’s individual and collective energy is canalized through the creation of the social form of the voluntary association and movement; and fourth, the galvanizing vision of “women are persons” manifests in arresting pedagogical projects and experiments in communicative action. Thus, we can insist that the “struggle for recognition” and the “struggle for justice” catalyze women in both rural and urban Canada as we witness a significant expansion of civil society. Our narrative will proceed by depicting the context of these times, a snapshot analysis of two women’s associations (Women’s Institutes, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and co-operative movements) and portraits in miniature of three women (Nellie McClung, Beatrice Bridgen and Violent McNaughton). Woven throughout this narrative, then, are the voices of many Canadian women who accomplished great things and have seldom been acknowledged.

2. SETTING

“In times like these”—this was the title of Nellie McClung’s best seller feminist text of 1915. What were these times, from the tail end of the 1890s to the early decades of the 20th century, like for women? The simple answer is pretty dreadful. Women’s situation was so dreadful that they were not even recognized as legal persons in the BNA Act of 1867. They weren’t, until the ecstatic cry of Emily Murphy “We’ve won! We’ve won!” broke the stillness in 1929. During these years Canada was convulsed and confused by seemingly overwhelming problems. Old scripts specifying precisely what men and women were to do in the world were no longer applicable. By the 1880s commentators in press and magazine (the literary public sphere) were noticing that women were straining against their restriction to the domestic sphere. The old idea that “women’s place was in the home”, while never discarded, didn’t really make sense when women were beginning to enter university to gain entrance to select professions such as law, medicine and teaching. Women were also working in factories and sweatshops, often at one half or one third of men’s wages. Life was not at all lovely for working class women. They were usually too exhausted from waged work and domestic duties to join many groups. Canada was in the midst of a massive transition to a new phase of industrial capitalism, that of the rule by the large, monopolistic corporation. These massive economic changes unsettled women’s ability to manage the lifeworld. Indeed, it seemed that this modernizing world had placed them at the mercy of the state without any power of influence.

Farm women faced their own peculiar problems. Many women had arrived on the prairies lured by the promise of free homesteads. Some had little clue about lay ahead of them. They faced physical isolation (in southern Saskatchewan, during the settlement period until WW I; in the north, into the 1930s). Women were isolated and lonely. Often times they were left alone to care for the farm and the children while their husbands were off transporting grain or getting needed materials. Loneliness bred depression and assorted mental illnesses. Eline Morrow, a farm woman who had immigrated to Shell Lake, Saskatchewan in 1917, tells the story of being so utterly bereft that she would find herself going down to the slough and saying, “Should I drown myself now or later?” (Steer, 1992, p. 162). These traits—isoaltion and loneliness—were exacerbated by farm women’s lack of access to medical care and midwives. The advantage that farm women had over urban women (both middle and working class) was that their pioneering work of farming was obviously a partnership. Most men could see that their farms couldn’t survive without their wives. So it is not surprising that men in the farm movement were basically supportive of female suffrage and expanded roles for women
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