

WOMEN IN ENGLAND 1870-1950: SEXUAL DIVISIONS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Jane Lewis. Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press and Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984.

Joy Parr

Jane Lewis calls her *Women in England 1870-1950* an "attempt to provide a brief review of the issues and themes that have emerged" in women's history in the past ten years. Her subtitle, "sexual divisions and social change" specifies her interpretive agenda, "to make a contribution towards our understanding of the changing nature of the boundaries of women's lives and how their experience within them was constructed." The book has been welcomed on both counts. Since Ivy Pinchbeck's *Women Workers in the Industrial Revolution* published in 1930, we have had no new synopsis of similar themes to offer undergraduate students. Social science scholars, visiting the terrain of the historian, regularly cite Pinchbeck as their guide, inattentive to the contradictions between Pinchbeck's perspective and that their own theory might prescribe. We've needed a text which did not have as a subtext the notion that industrial change was women's salvation, because it set them snugly in the home, supported in

their child-rearing by a breadwinner spouse, one which rather set young historical researchers and visitors to thinking about the past in ways which allowed them to understand and appraise the best of recent research.

The book is divided not by decade, industry or region, but by class specific experience within two broad categories, 'Family, marriage and motherhood' and 'Employment.' This organisational strategy emphasises the class origins of gender archetypes and highlights the dissonance of gendered lives across class boundaries. Lewis is attentive to regional sectoral variation and to the essential connectedness of public and private life, but by developing her arguments about sexual divisions as reconfigurations of class hierarchies separately for paid work and life apart from paid work, she makes the contingency and partialness of material explanations for the exercise of power clear.

The study is strongest where Lewis' own contribution has been most considerable, in the discussions of marital relations, health and welfare and middle class intellectual and philanthropic concerns. Here the text is replete with telling first person accounts, and inadvertent moments of candour culled from royal commission testimony, which guide readers expertly to the heart of the matter. Here the analysis is most nuanced and

confident, and most eloquently explicated. Feminist analysis has not gone so far in revising historical accounts of the English formal economy as it has in reinterpreting sexuality, reproduction, domestic gender roles and voluntary associations in the past century. The chapters on wage work are shorter, more statistical, more suggestive on balance of what is to be done than reinterpetive of completed research.

The study will be especially valuable to North American students because the thesis literature and writing, which Lewis described as 'unpublished or tucked away in inaccessible journals' in Britain, often on this side of the Atlantic is utterly unavailable rather than merely awkwardly located.

This is, I think, the first text I've read, written by a contemporary about a rapidly expanding field in which I work and teach. Looking past the physical artifact to the process of creating it, I am struck by the arduousness of the task, the sheer mass of material to be tracked down and assimilated, and the troubling hesitancy which must have lingered through the writing, one colleague trying accurately to capture the best of the toil and imagination of her friends and peers over ten exciting years. It is a fine and useful book which I am delighted to have on hand.

"THEY'RE STILL WOMEN AFTER ALL": THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND CANADIAN WOMANHOOD

Ruth Roach Pierson. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1986.

Wendy Mitchinson

"*They're Still Women After All*": The *Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* is a long awaited book. Much of the information has been previously published in article form but by bringing the articles together, rewriting some, and adding new ones, Professor Pierson has produced a coherent monograph which will be the standard against which further studies of women in the 1940s will be judged. The book consists of six major chapters, four of which focus on women in the armed services. These examine recruitment of women into the CWAC, concerns on the part of civilians over that recruitment, the so-called "whispering"

campaign about the morality of such women, and the treatment they received from the various military services when they transgressed the accepted limits of sexual behaviour and contracted VD. Two additional chapters focus on women's involvement in civilian life, one on their recruitment into paid employment and their volunteer work and the second on the various government supported job-training schemes open to women.

Two major themes emerge from "*They're Still Women After All*." One is that the greatest contribution which women made was in unpaid work in the home and in volunteer work outside the home. This is important to keep in mind for too often historians have concentrated on those women in paid employment perhaps seeing them as more independent than their unpaid sisters. But as Professor Pierson points out, the women in unpaid work were dynamic, self-confident women who were unwilling to allow others to infringe in areas they considered

their special preserve. For example, at one point during the war the federal government decided to coordinate the work of the volunteer agencies which had emerged, especially that of the Canadian Women's Voluntary Services. When informed of this, the Ontario section barraged the government with protests, pointing out that the government was interfering in their sphere and making the telling point that the purpose of volunteerism was to save money and having to pay a government director somehow defeated that purpose. The government, somewhat taken aback, eventually reached a compromise with the women.

A second theme which emerges is the unwillingness of Canadians in general to cope with women doing non-traditional work. When faced with this the reaction was to attack the morality of the women so engaged. This reluctance to see women in non-traditional areas is linked to Pierson's main thesis which is that WWII was not a major turning point for women

and that it was not a particularly liberating period. For those familiar with Pierson's earlier work this will not come as a surprise but for those who are not, they will be unable to see WWII in quite the same optimistic light again. What has to be kept in mind, however, is that women themselves were primary supporters of traditional careers for women. As Pierson points out, "middle to upper-class women's organizations, recognized by government as the representatives of

women's interests, placed their influence behind the prevailing inclination of public policy to preserve sex-typed occupations, the sexual division of labour, and the class-based occupational structure." (p.63)

"*They're Still Women After All*" is now the major source for those interested in Canadian women in the 1940s. It is elegantly written and interspersed with excellent photographs and cartoons. The research is prodigious, and as a result

Professor Pierson has uncovered a wealth of information for historians to feed on and has provided new and exciting leads for future research. WWII may not have been a lasting experience for women, but it did teach one lesson which we should not forget – where there is political will the government and society can change and do change. It would be comforting if we could rediscover that political will without having it coincide with another World War.

TRADITIONALISM, NATIONALISM, AND FEMINISM: WOMEN WRITERS OF QUEBEC

Edited by Paula Gilbert Lewis. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985.

Jeannette Urbas

This book is a collection of seventeen essays on women writers of Quebec considered, as the title indicates, within the framework of three categories: traditionalism, nationalism and feminism. It combines a historical perspective with contemporary analysis ranging from the end of the nineteenth century with a discussion of Laure Conan's *Angéline de Montbrun* to the creative production of the early 1980s.

In her introduction Paula Gilbert Lewis stresses the unique situation of Quebec, at the crossroads of both American and French thought. The essays fall into three time periods, each corresponding with a particular outlook, from the pre-1960s when traditionalism is most evident, to the 1960s when nationalism is central, to the 1970s and 1980s when feminism comes to the fore. Inevitably, there is an over-

lapping of categories in the study of individual authors. In addition, the close link between nationalism and feminism in Quebec has never been abandoned.

Some women writers have been omitted because of a lack of current research on their writing but those who are included offer a good representation, as well as considerable variety. The only writer who is not specifically Québécoise is the Acadian, Antonine Maillet, whose work, however, fits into the overall context and the themes of the book. All but three of the authors are still living.

As the essays move into the more recent period, issues particularly pertinent to feminist writing are explored, e.g. the emphasis on the power of language, the search for expression in a specific female discourse, the use of myth and a newly discovered female mythology. The relationship between lesbian feminism as a way of life and as a revolutionary force in literature is also examined. Approaches to change vary from the belief that the liberation of each individual must come from within and the fundamental struggle for women must be against a patriarchal society (Nicole Brossard) to concern with the social conscience of Quebec and skeptic-

ism of any discourse urging women to wage war indiscriminately on their male compatriots (Madeleine Gagnon). The final essay is an update on women's theatre in Quebec and its attempt to replace unacceptable female stereotypes on the stage.

The essay on Louky Bersianik points to a paradox faced by feminist authors in their desire to communicate: "the more she speaks the phallic language, the better understood she makes herself *L'Eugélonne*; the more she speaks in the female (fluidity, polysemy, etymologies, babble), that is, the more she subverts the normative code (especially in *Maternité*), the more restricted becomes the group to whom she addresses herself and who understands her."

This collection is designed to appeal to both specialists familiar with the authors discussed and non-specialists who seek an introduction to a fascinating new area of knowledge. Specialists, like myself, will disagree with individual researchers about some points, such as the interpretation of the ending of Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska*, but the book as a whole is thought-provoking and informative.

WATER AND LIGHT: GHAZALS AND ANTI GHAZALS

Phyllis Webb. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1984.

Heather Murray

The title of *Water and Light: Ghazals and Anti Ghazals* lures the reader with the seductions of the exotic and the obliquely oppositional. (If we wonder what is a ghazal, still less can we imagine its anti-part). The mirrored pairings of water and light, ghazal and anti ghazal, suggest multiple inter- and cross-relationships,

counterings and encounterings. The cover photo by Gordon Robertson for this handsome volume, of water lilies and pond grasses, inmixes indistinguishably the reflected and reflecting, as will the verse itself. And "Webb" on the cover completes the reader's ensnarement – for her production is as spare as the poems themselves, and a new book by her is an event.

The table of contents shows a five-section division to the book: "Sunday Water: Thirteen Anti Ghazals," "The Birds," "I Daniel," "Frivolities," "Middle Distance." These too, intrigue, for their relationship is not easily ascertained. An

accompanying series of cryptic dublets ("No one denied you your memory of wings: / those clouds, although faces, are not your own.") adds complexity to perplexity. On the facing page, an acknowledgement to *Ghazals of Ghalib: Versions from the Urdu*, edited by Aijaz Ahmad, with translations by W.S. Merwin, William Hunt and, most intriguingly, Adrienne Rich, encourages the reader to learn more about Webb's poetic project here.

The ghazal, writes Ahmad, provides the basic poetic form in Urdu from the beginning of the language until the middle of this century. It is composed of at