

# FRENCH-CANADIAN WOMEN AND THE NEW SOCIAL HISTORY:

## SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR ARCHIVAL RESEARCH

John Abbott and Alison Prentice

Bien que la dossier "officiel" (les lois adoptées par les gouvernements et les règlements des institutions) soit un élément essentiel de l'histoire des femmes, les historien(ne)s des femmes ont recours à des sources moins orthodoxes pour créer leurs biographies collectives. Cet article se sert du genre de documents qui étaient d'intérêt pour Marta Danylewycz, dans ses recherches sur l'histoire des femmes canadiennes-françaises.

Historians of women soon learn that sources for the history of women are not always to be found in the card catalogues of public libraries or archives under the heading of "women." Indeed, when it comes to women, a multitude of institutions and collections are likely to be important to the researcher.<sup>1</sup> The examples that follow are drawn from the kind of sources that were of particular interest to Marta Danylewycz in her work on the history of French-Canadian women.

Together they illustrate the importance of the individual biography in women's history. Although each document provides only a fragment of a woman's life, it is from such fragments that historians attempt to create the collective biographies that are such a vital part of the larger picture. This is not to deny the im-

portance of the "official" record: the laws passed by governments and the rules and regulations of institutions are also essential components of women's history. It was one of the special contributions of Marta Danylewycz and her generation of historians to recognize, however, that the bare bones of official history were just that – they needed to be filled in with the flesh and blood of real people.

Real people are not always perfect. They do not always do what they are supposed to do, according to the rules and regulations. These documents illustrate the lives of women who were not entirely satisfied and saw fit to try to alter things, either by their protests or their actions.

### Document 1

In her pathbreaking study of the *Congrégation de Notre Dame* and the *Soeurs de Miséricorde*,<sup>2</sup> Marta drew heavily on the life histories or "necrologies" that were written about the sisters at the time of their deaths. Her goal was to try to understand what convent life meant to the women involved, to see the religious life from their point of view. Sister Liliane Thériault, the archivist of the Misericordia Sisters who observed Marta at work on these documents, wrote this about her approach to her sources:

*Elle savait valoriser les moindres parcelles de bien chez la femme, dans la religieuse. Longuement, on l'a vue, perplexe, s'attarder sur l'histoire de notre communauté, sur le mépris de la société envers notre oeuvre: l'accueil aux mères-célibataires . . . puis, se reportant à l'époque concernée, savait toujours conclure positivement. La survie de notre communauté lui paraissait un mystère . . .*<sup>3</sup>

The life history of Marie Hudon, Sister Elisabeth, of the Misericordia Sisters, illustrates a number of themes that Marta discovered in the history of religious women in Quebec: their frequent attendance at a convent school; the search for an order that met their individual needs; the variety of work experiences that the convent could provide; the importance of spiritual practice in the life of a sister; and the importance of mutual support in the convent. A further theme illustrated in this document is the problem of physical and mental health. Like their lay counterparts, religious women in the nineteenth century did not always enjoy perfect health and their struggles in this area deserve study. The following document is to be found, in printed form, in the *Biographies des Soeurs Décédées depuis 1853-1894* (volume 1), and also exists in manuscript in the Misericordia Sisters' archives in Montreal.<sup>4</sup>

### Nécrologie de Sr. Marie Hudon

#### en religion

#### Soeur Ste Elisabeth

"J'ai été remplie de zèle pour le Seigneur, le Dieu des armées."  
Notre chère Soeur Marie Julie Hudon, en religion Sr. S. Elisabeth, naquit à la Rivière Ouelle, le 5 Avril, 1824, d'une famille des plus chrétiennes et des plus respectables. Ses pieux parents se firent un devoir de cultiver les jeunes coeurs que Dieu leur avait confiés, en leur procurant le bienfait de l'instruction. La jeune Marie fut d'abord confiée aux soins des Révérendes Soeurs de la Congrégation établies dans la paroisse; elle passa ensuite quelque temps comme pensionnaire chez les Dames Ursulines de Québec.

Se sentant appelée à la vie religieuse, la Communauté de la Providence fixa son choix; elle y fut admise comme Postulante, mais

après un séjour de quelques mois dans cette maison, elle comprit que Dieu ne l'y appelait pas et résolut de retourner dans le monde. Elle demeura ensuite plusieurs années chez l'un de ses frères, sans trop se soucier de l'avenir. Au milieu du bien-être dont elle jouissait, la voix de Dieu se fit de nouveau entendu. De sérieuses réflexions sur la vanité des choses d'ici-bas, sur la nécessité du salut, et surtout sur le malheur de ceux qui ne connaissent pas la vraie foi, la déterminèrent à faire un nouvel essai. Elle vint frapper à la porte de notre maison, où elle fut recue le 5 Novembre, 1860, et le 24 Septembre, 1862, elle eut le bonheur de prononcer ses vœux.

Pendant plus de trente ans, cette chère Soeur a fourni sa bonne part

de dévouement parmi nous; elle fut employée tantôt à la buanderie, tantôt à la savonnerie ou au réfectoire, et comme elle avait des aptitudes particulières pour la couture, elle rendit de bons services comme robrière ou pour les ouvrages de broderie. Elle apporta beaucoup d'ordre et d'économie dans tout ce qu'elle faisait. Par amour pour la sainte pauvreté, elle aimait à porter de vieux habits qu'elle raccommodait avec soin afin de les faire durer le plus longtemps possible.

Son zèle se portait surtout du côté de la malheureuse Angleterre, qu'en desirs elle convertissait tout entière à la foi des ses ancêtres. Dans ce but, elle s'imposait de rudes pénitences, jeunant, veillant et macérant sa chair sans relâche. Elle eut voulu embraser tous les cœurs de ce même zèle, qui était parfois exagéré et peu discrets. Toutefois le bon Dieu n'a pas du être offensé dans ces circonstances, car son intention était bonne. Elle avait une grande dévotion envers l'auguste Sacrement de l'autel, et on la voyait souvent passer de longues heures à genoux au pieds de ce bon Maître.

A force d'instances, elle avait obtenu en l'année 1888, d'être envoyée à la mission de New York, mais ses forces ne lui permettant pas de seconder nos Soeurs dans les travaux inhérents à une nouvelle fondation, elle ne put y demeurer que très peu de temps. En effet, ses

mortifications excessives avaient ruiné sa constitution, sa faiblesse croissante semblait aussi influencer sur le caractère et l'esprit naturellement excentriques, de sorte que durant les dernières années de sa vie, ses paroles et ses actions n'avaient pas toujours toute la discrétion voulue... Cependant, elle désirait le bien, et nous savons que Dieu qui voit les choses à la clarté de la divine sagesse, ne juge pas comme les hommes.

Cette chère Soeur ne laissa pas de se rendre utile en remplissant l'office de réglemantaire, jusqu'à ce que ses forces épuisées la contraignirent d'entrer à l'infirmerie. Elle ne se faisait pas illusion sur son état, et elle envisageait la mort sans crainte, faisant tous ses petits préparatifs avec calme et résignation... Elle fit sa confession et... notre Père Chapelain vint lui apporter le Saint Viatique et lui administrer le Sacrement de l'Extrême Onction. Ces saintes cérémonies à peine terminées elle rendit paisiblement son âme à Dieu. en présence du Père Chapelain et de la Communauté réunie, qui l'assistaient de leurs prières.

Elle était âgée de 69 ans, 4 mois, 24 jours, et elle avait passé 32 ans, 9 mois, 24 jours, en religion.

Que par la miséricorde du Cœur de Jésus, son âme repose en paix et qu'elle prie pour nous!

## Nécrologie de Sr. Marie Hudon: in religion Soeur St. Elisabeth

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## Document 2

The opening of Ontario north of the French River in the last quarter of the nineteenth century coincided with an exodus of Québécois(es) who were hard-pressed by high birth rates and limited opportunities at home. Many of them were people who, in Ontario, would find themselves restricted to manual labour by their minimal schooling and low levels of competence in the English language. The wants of these migrants nevertheless coincided neatly with the economic needs of the new primary resource frontier, and they came to constitute a substantial portion of the work force on the land and in the forests, mills and mines of Nipissing, Sudbury, Timiskaming, Cochrane and Algoma.

While they established their homes, successive Ontario governments were fashioning policies of territorial, economic and cultural imperialism designed to secure provincial title to this geographically vast, economically rich, and culturally diverse hinterland. In the debates over the Manitoba boundary, the export of saw logs, pulp wood and nickle-copper matte to the United States, and the bilingual schools question, one can read in the political record the attempts of provincial governments, Liberal and Conservative, to create a new economic domain and preserve an old cultural empire.

The controversy over the schooling of French-Canadian and "foreign" children should be studied within the context of Toronto's struggle with Ottawa for unre-



stricted title to the full measure of her wilderness inheritance, the insistence on provincial development policies which challenged national priorities, and the conviction that Anglo-Ontarian culture and no other should be nurtured on the primary resource frontier, that controversy over the schooling of French-Canadian and "foreign" children should be studied.<sup>5</sup>

By 1905 the problems of schooling a mixed anglo- and francophone population in eastern and northern Ontario had assumed proportions sufficiently large and well defined to challenge a system designed to transmit the basic values of Anglo-Ontarian culture. The election of January 1905 put into power a Conservative government prepared to enforce Regulations designating English as the language of instruction. The "enforcer" was the school inspector, and the new tone set by the Whitney govern-

ment was evident in the Deputy Minister of Education's instructions of 20 July 1906 to Leslie A. Green, school inspector for the District of Algoma. Expressing approval of Green's decision to prohibit Quebec texts and French as the language of instruction in S.S. #6 Denison, he wrote:

*I am directed by the Minister of Education to approve of your action in notifying the Trustees of No. 6 Denison that the Quebec French Text Books must be discarded and the authorized school books for Ontario used in the school. The bi-lingual readers, of course, may be used, but the teacher must soon prepare herself to teach English or the Trustees must provide an English speaking teacher instead.<sup>6</sup>*

This hardening of the imperial line enhanced levels of social tension in many northern Ontario communities. The rising incidence of anger may be observed in the

increasing frequency with which ordinary people vented their frustration in furious letters to inspectors, the Deputy Minister and the Minister of Education. Many of these were from anglophones or acculturated French-Canadians encouraged by public policy to expose violations of Regulations by determined Franco-Ontarian trustees. Some, like the "Quebec teacher" who wrote to protest Green's refusal to renew her teaching certificate, found the government's cultural policy at war with human values.<sup>7</sup> Here we may read the impact of large ideas upon the lives of "little" people and those whom, to some extent, they represented. In letters such as these – often the only earthly remains of the people who penned them – Marta Danylewycz found the real stuff of human experience, experience which fed her soul and made her such an inspiration to students and colleagues.

Mond, Ont.  
Dec. 1st/08.

Mr. Green, "Inspector;"

Dear Sir: –

It is impossible for me to refrain any longer from writing you. As a matter of fact, you have severely hurt my feelings to quite an extent, by your overbearing deceptive authority. You seem to undervalue my method of teaching, and cease to comply with the wishes of both the Board and myself to issue a permit from the Department. O, No! but, you could give two other Quebec Teachers permits without any difficulty.

Do you consider yourself a Gentleman? Well, I guess not. Yes, Mr. Green, you have favoured your own Ont. Teachers, and placed them in schools when they have failed in their exams, and I'll guarantee, there's not one third of your old Ont. Teachers, can compete with myself in regard to matters of Education.

You need not get so haughty, and I see not why, you have any reason to complain, when neither the Board, nor the people have lodged not even the slightest complaint whatsoever, about me or my teaching, and I want to tell you it is not for the interest of those poor little French and Foreign children, you are looking; it is to try to get one of your own kind to replace me, as you are so begrudging for my drawing a few dollars from that school, and I consider I earn it conscientiously.

Remember, Mr. Green, I do not stoop to my inferiors, as I am as independent as the sun that shines, and I assure you, if you think you have done Justice to me, you are sadly mistaken, and sooner or later, your overbearing authority may prosper to a certain extent in this world; but, in the next your feeble tongue shall no longer have its earthly power, and you will moan forth for a Quebec Teacher to sympathise with you in your agonies.

You know we are all placed in this world to be charitable to one another, but to Dismiss a poor girl who is decently and honestly earning a living; you are simply a Tyrant. This is the first year you have ever visited the schools twice, and I think you have very little consideration to act so.

Judging from the way I got those children, they have advanced remarkably well under my Jurisdiction. Those little French & Foreigners could not say yes, when I came & now they are reading in second Reader well & spelling and doing some of their long division; and moreover, when children only attend two day in the week makes it both slow and discouraging for the Teacher. However, I want you to thoroughly understand, this is not the only school, or, you the only Inspector. I regret to say, you are the only man that ever I had the occasion of saying, You are no Gentleman, to treat a lady in such a manner.

Yes, Mr. Green, I have a Model school certificate and have taught successfully in Ont. for three terms, have also taught in Ottawa Ont. Business College several branches & can produce certificates for same, and they were just so smart a people as you'll find at the Soo.

But you think I am unqualified to teach from letters up to Third reader up here in shanty town. Yes, you're what I'd call a an exceptional cleaver man, but its not every day you'll meet your match, who shall continue to fight for their honest rights, as the hand of the present writer.

In conclusion, hoping that your remorse of conscience will check you and moderate your undermining deceptive, and overbearing disposition, and learn a lesson from a Quebec Teacher.

Now, I am satisfied, so you can satisfy yourself.

Signed,  
A Quebec Teacher.

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First page of letter from "A Quebec Teacher" to school inspector Leslie A. Green, 1 Dec. 1908.  
Credit: Archives of Ontario (Toronto)

<sup>1</sup>A number of surveys have been made of archival sources in Canadian women's history. See, for example, those published in the *Canadian Newsletter of Research on Women* - since 1978 entitled *Resources for Feminist Research* - (February and October 1976 and February 1977 Supplement), and the informal publications of the Canadian Women's History Project, OISE, on sources in Ontario and British Columbia. A survey of archival sources in Manitoba, undertaken by a team led by Mary Kinnear, should be completed soon and may be a model for future work at the provincial level. Certainly, the early surveys by no means exhausted the possible sources on women in Canadian archives, let alone the materials held in private hands which have yet to be deposited. A great deal of work, both in collecting, cataloguing and publication of lists of sources remains to be done. For

a discussion of the nature of the task, see Veronica Strong-Boag, "Raising Cleo's Consciousness: Women's History and Archives in Canada," *Archivaria* 6 (Summer 1978), 70-82.

<sup>2</sup>"Taking the Veil in Montreal, 1840-1920: An Alternative to Marriage, Motherhood and Spinsterhood" (Ph.D Thesis, University of Toronto, 1981). Friends have prepared the manuscript for publication and it should appear in book form in the fall of 1987.

<sup>3</sup>Liliane Thériault, s.m. à Alison Prentice (25 mars 1986).

<sup>4</sup>RH - 7, V 1460, 127. Archives des Soeurs de Miséricorde, Montréal.

<sup>5</sup>The best analysis of economic development is H.V. Nelles, *The Politics of Development: Forests, Mines & Hydro-electric Power in Ontario* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1974). Social and cultural policy is the subject of a forthcoming study by J.R. Abbott,

*Education and the Politics of Social Development: Ontario and its Laurentian Frontier, 1850-1950.*

<sup>6</sup>Deputy Minister of Education Colquhoun to L.A. Green, Toronto 20 July 1906), Archives of Ontario, R.G. 2, F-3-E, Box 4.

<sup>7</sup>"A Quebec Teacher" to L.A. Green, Mond, Ont. (1 Dec. 1908), AO, R.G. 2, F-3-E, Box 8 (1909). For an analysis of relationships between male inspectors and female teachers in Ontario at the turn of this century, see J.R. Abbott, "Accomplishing 'A Man's Task': Rural Women Teachers, Male Culture, and the School Inspectorate in Ontario," in *Ontario History* (December 1986).

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## MILIEU

De loin et de longtemps  
Je retourne aux sources  
Pour repartir  
Pour recommencer

J'ai vu la première neige tomber  
J'ai vu tourner le vent  
Des défaveurs  
Horribles et secrètes  
Les incontinenances de l'écrit

Je sens l'encens qui monte  
Je sens les sacrifices s'allumer  
Des sorcières  
Tangibles et corrompues  
Les boursuflures de la poésie

De partout et de longtemps  
Je replonge dans les mers  
Pour refaire  
Pour réaliser

Le MILIEU  
Et vivre au centre de moi-même  
Avec mes gages  
D'abstinence

**Céline Messner**  
Montréal, Québec