



# BOOK REVIEWS

## NOT JUST PIN MONEY: SELECTED ESSAYS ON THE HISTORY OF WOMEN'S WORK IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Edited by Barbara K. Latham and Roberta J. Pazdro. Camosun College, Victoria, B.C., 1984.

*Phyllis M. Senese*

*Not Just Pin Money*, as its subtitle indicates, is a collection of papers that were presented at the first Women's History in British Columbia Conference held at Camosun College in April 1984. The authors of the papers included students, dedicated amateur historians and professional academics. The editors aptly describe the papers as encompassing the "journalistic to the academic," and therein lies a weakness of this book. Many of the essays by the less experienced writers would have benefitted from a far more rigorous editing. While it is important, as the conference organisers intended, to encourage a tremendous range of women to bring their perspectives to the conference, it is equally important to present those findings as cogently as possible to make them of benefit to women everywhere. A few technical glitches have managed to creep into this book: unscrambling pages 290-295 is a good test of concentration.

As Latham and Pazdro indicate, the single theme that ties these essays together is that of women's work experience. For the most part, the papers describe those parts of the lives of native women, Asian immigrant women, colonial gentry and hardy pioneers that involved contact with some element of the world of work, broadly defined. There are essays in this collection that consider the unpaid work of women, the fight for social legislation to protect women, the relationship between women and organised labour, the activities of clubwomen, professional women and women in poli-

tics. It is clear that women in British Columbia shared with women elsewhere the battle against tradition, custom and rigid institutions in a quest to have their contributions to the building of their communities recognised and valued. These essays fill in some gaps in the record and amplify our understanding of the common problems faced by women in Canada – regardless of their origins, social standing or education – in gaining access to the rewards offered by "work." To write the history of women in Canada, we need conferences like Camosun's held annually in every province and territory for many years to come with their proceedings published, to advance the process of discovery, assessment and understanding about the lives of women in Canada.

*Not Just Pin Money* raises, unintentionally, some serious questions for all of us involved in women's history. There is no single approach or point of view that links these essays. Many tendencies are evident, many passionately held points of view are barely held in check. Because there is no methodological or ideological unity to this book, something else becomes sharply evident. In much recent writing about women, in this book and elsewhere, there has developed the habit of considering women's past almost exclusively in terms of victimisation. Women do not advance in employment because they are victims of the system, employers, a male dominated culture, etc. It is not hard to find the multitude of ways in which custom, convention and blatant prejudice have coalesced to the disadvantage of women: the essays in this collection demonstrate the point again convincingly.

There is, or should be, another aspect of the past that is considered. Susan Wade, in her essay in this collection on "Joan Kennedy and the British Columbia Women's Service Corps," points to the problem. If women were so badly served by the status quo, why did this group of women (which by 1940 numbered over

1200 in B.C.) embrace militarism so totally and enthusiastically? Were they merely confused and consumed by patriotic fervour? Were they envious of the alleged glamour of uniforms? Were they afraid of being left out? Their motivation, at the moment, is irrelevant: what matters is their *choice* to involve themselves militarily in the preparations for war. Their choice suggests the complexity of understanding what women in the past were doing, because it is at once imperative and almost impossible to reconstruct *why* they behaved as they did. Frequently, as we look back, we tend not to examine very closely the explanations that women themselves gave for their choices. If we read into the past our present preoccupations, understanding that past becomes all the more difficult. Underlying this habit of presentism is a contemporary demand for equality between women and men. In reality, that means women being forced to adopt the values and approaches to life of men. It is just possible that many women in the early decades of this century were not overly enthusiastic about leaving their homes to work, not because their consciousness was insufficiently raised but because they rejected what "work" had to offer. Aside from carrying two full time jobs and coping with all but non-existent child care facilities, factory conditions were inhuman, hours were intolerable, wages were pitiful. As men were to discover, by the late nineteenth century, technology was placing more and more restraints on the human element in the production of goods. As things have developed in capitalist societies, no one should want to go out to work: it has been made a necessity for survival. Our society programmes us to accept the imperatives dictated by the work place; we are taught to be consumers. We need to wonder whether many women made a conscious choice to disengage from those dictates by shunning the world of work outside the home until dire necessity forced them to; asking the question might help us under-

stand why there are many women today who reject feminism for similar reasons. It does women's history no service simply to imply that any woman who is not a feminist of some sort had been duped or brainwashed. We need not only to describe the past lives of women, but we also need to accept those lives on their own terms. To skirt the issue of motiva-

tion, to assume that women "then" thought as women do "now", is to ignore time and place in women's history and to denigrate that history. We need to ask of women in the past, as we need to ask of women today: what are women's priorities? Are women trying to build a world that is different and better than the one that restricts them, or do women only

want to be let into the clubhouse to be like the boys? Once past the purely descriptive, each essay in *Not Just Pin Money* poses this dilemma.

Despite some ragged edges, *Not Just Pin Money* contains new information, provocative insights and deserves to become required reading in any course on the history of women in Canada.

### **CANADA HOME: JULIA HORATIA EWING'S FREDERICTON LETTERS, 1867-1869**

Edited by Margaret Howard Blom and Thomas E. Blom. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1983.

*Margaret Conrad*

Julia Horatia (Gatty) Ewing (1841-85), the British-born writer of children's stories, was much admired by the likes of Rudyard Kipling and Henry James. Of delicate constitution, she was a romantic soul who by all accounts, including her own, was happily married to an officer in Queen Victoria's 22nd Regiment which was posted to Fredericton in 1867. From this 27-month Canadian experience came over 100 letters which Julia Ewing wrote to her close family circle in England. The Bloms have carefully edited these letters and illustrated them with Ewing's Fredericton sketches to produce another handsome volume in the UBC Press series of diaries and reminiscences. While the letters are less revealing of 'ordinary' life than modern readers may have wished, they are the very stuff of Victorian middle class women's history and offer a lucid account of high society in Fredericton at the time of Confederation.

Julia Ewing's letters read much like a Jane Austin novel. This is in part, the editors tell us, because she did not wish to worry her family back in England with accounts about 'roughing it' in the colonial

bush. It is also because Julia Ewing was happily and uncritically socialized to the values of middle class Victorian society. She describes Fredericton summer nights as settings for operas, finds the concept of a native Indian woman riding a train as foreign as Plato dancing a polka, and is moved to rapture by the flora and fauna of North America. She fills those hours not consumed with domestic chores and social obligations with her sketch book, her flower press and her writing. Victorian ladies did not waste their time. Indeed, Canada was well served by the Susanna Moodies, Catharine Parr Traills and Julia Ewings who preserved the country's natural history, chronicled its social customs and, on occasion, left a mark on the society they so diligently observed. Julia Ewing's stay in Canada was too brief and her personality too retiring to allow her to transform the community in which she was situated or even to allow Canadians to lay claim to her as they have Susanna Moodie. Nevertheless, Ewing's disciplined eye and practiced pen offer us a rare window through which to see how others saw us over a century ago.

Scholars of women's history will be delighted with the details of women's domestic economy preserved in these letters, as well as the description of the close bonds of female friendships and family relationships. They will also find evidence concerning the advice books consulted, the material possessions treasured, the values so deeply held as to be invisible among women of Ewing's

class and culture. ". . . I can only write a scrap today. I am wildly busy copying sketches and varnishing leaves to send you," she wrote to her sister in October 1867. "I am sending a book of Autumn Leaves to the Mum - & a few for Mrs. Bryce - & for Aunt Mary. Also some bits of bead work for Mrs. Aveling - & Annie Bonnar - which might be sent to Howard St. for an opportunity" (pp. 60-61). No grass grew under the feet of the women in Ewing's circle, either on matters commercial or domestic. ". . . I am getting our house quite spic & span. The only drawback is that none of you can see it. . . The dirt & untidiness of New Brunswickers combined with the prevalence of the *irish* elements in servants & workmen, is enough to cure an untidy party like myself - and I have 'set my face as a flint' against one 'irish corner' inside or out" (p. 156). Of course, like other British travellers in Canada, Ewing pays much attention to the vagaries of the climate, the mails and the local 'help.' And she offers practical advice, complete with sketches, on how to make knickerbockers to ward off winter chills (p. 349). She provides little direct evidence of the social tensions between the town folks and the military which led to the sensational Brennen murder trial in October 1868 but we can guess after reading Ewing's letters that the 'airs' of the transient officers and their families would not always go down well with the local populace. It is perhaps fitting that when the Ewings left Fredericton, it marked the end of the official British military presence in Julia Ewing's 'Canada Home.'

### **THE LAST BEST WEST: WOMEN ON THE ALBERTA FRONTIER 1880-1930**

Elaine Leslau Silverman. Montreal: Eden Press, 1984.

*Rebecca Coulter*

In *The Last Best West*, Silverman has

utilized the results of more than one hundred and fifty oral interviews with women from various ethnic, religious and class backgrounds to create what she calls "a collective autobiography" of women on the Alberta frontier. The book is organized around the events which the women themselves identified as important in their life cycles so that chapters are included on topics such as girlhood,

courtship and marriage, contraception and childbirth, household work, waged labour and social life. In each chapter, Silverman effectively weaves together the words of individual women with well-written and informative bridges to demonstrate the commonalities and differences in women's experiences.

The format adopted by Silverman succeeds in helping the reader feel and