

BOOK REVIEWS

Small Expectations: Society's Betrayal of Older Women

Leah Cohen, McClelland and
Stewart, 1984

Johanna H. Stuckey

Leah Cohen's *Small Expectations* is a book which all young and middle-aged Canadian women *must* read — and quickly — for the quality of their lives as they age depends on their knowing the horrifying facts about what they can expect in their last years. One of Cohen's informants, a woman of 104 years of age, said: "If I have any advice it is that women should plan ahead and not trust that the future will take care of itself." (167)

In her book Cohen explores every aspect of society's treatment of women as they age — self-image, health, housing, violence, and poverty. Her indictment of our society is direct and unequivocal. Her chapter "To Be Old, a Woman, and Poor" contains one of the best short expositions of the failures of our various pension plans that I have read. She concludes that "older women are being punished for surviving in our society." (142) Poverty causes older women to lose their dignity and to find themselves engaged in "a grim battle for survival." (142) Even single professional women can find themselves in such a situation, and married women are "one man away from poverty." (125)

Small Expectations is, however, not totally a depressing book. In the chapter "Magnificent Survivors," Cohen presents interviews with seventeen very different older women, all of whom have worked out ways of handling their own aging in

a positive, life-enhancing fashion; and in the final chapters, she examines political activists and makes a number of strongly presented, thought-out recommendations for action. She outlines a number of energetic and exciting ways in which aging women have prepared, or are preparing, for their old age. Inter-generational support and self-help are central and political action critical.

Small Expectations should be compulsory reading for every woman contemplating marriage or divorce, changing jobs, taking a job, retiring — in short, every woman in Canada, and especially young women, those women who are beginning their lives with little thought to the end of their lives. Unless we *know* and take action *now*, as Leah Cohen so convincingly shows, our last years will probably be bleak, restricted, and undignified. Leah Cohen deserves our gratitude for tackling so unpopular a topic and making her findings so readable, human, and moving. So read this book at once. It is about you!



A Profile of Canada's Older Population

L.O. Stone and S. Fletcher, Institute
for Research on Public Policy.

Marion Colby

Although this is a small book, it contains extremely valuable information for people working in the field of gerontology. After an introductory opening chapter, the authors, Susan Fletcher and Leroy Stone, present very current statistics on the aging population in Canada.

By tracing the effect of aging into the twenty-first century, they provide data that would be very useful for pension reform and for the provision of housing and social services for the aged.

Chapter three takes into account the health services that will be needed by an increased aging population. This group of citizens' health needs are specific; hospitals and auxiliary health facilities must learn to adapt to the demands of this group.

"One of the most striking features in the changing profile of Canada's older population is the substantial and widening imbalance in numbers between females and males. In the first half of this century, males outnumbered females slightly in all of the five selected age groups of the population aged 55 and over (see Chart 2.4). Since 1961 females have been predominant in the population aged 65 and over." (14)

Some interesting data in conjunction with this is that, while in the overall population women use hospitals more than men, in the over-seventy age group, men are more often hospitalized than women. The book explores the reasons for women's longevity and better care of their bodies — natural superiority? a greater sensitivity to their own physical and psychological needs? an intuitive sense of self?

The chapter on "The Income Position of Senior Citizens Groups" analyses individual income, family income, and sources of income. And once again the income discrepancy of older men and of older women is made abundantly clear. This chapter, as well as most others, comes with excellent charts and graphs — one sees at a glance the pattern. Even though the data seem sufficient for this type of a report, the authors note that they encountered a distressing lack of source material and they hope that "something can be done about this important impediment to public enlightenment and national use of public resources."

Available from: The Institute for Research on Public Policy/Institut de recherches politiques, 2149 MacKay Street, Montreal, Quebec, H3G 2J2.