

# Book Reviews



Illustration by Gail Geltner

## Women and Colonization Anthropological Perspectives

*edited by Mona Etienne and Eleanor Leacock, Praeger, 1980, pp.339 Meg Luxton*

This is an excellent book. It is a collection of 12 articles, each based on ethnographic research from different parts of the world. For the most part, the articles are good, combining solid historical material and field data with well argued analyses. However, while the articles make a contribution to the ethnographies of their respective regions, the greatest strength of this book lies in its integration as a collection.

The book as a whole analyzes the impact of Western capitalist systems on the peoples they colonized by focusing on the different ways the colonized women and men were affected by and responded to their colonized position. The book begins with a lengthy introductory essay by the editors and head notes at the beginning of each chapter set each article in comparative and historical perspective. These give the book its real strength for while the wealth of ethnographic data make it useful as an in-

troductory study, the clarity of the critiques which are developed locate the book within the most complex debates in the literature.

A number of important themes are developed. The first is the recognition by most of the authors that women are actors in social life. Respect for women runs throughout the whole book in a refreshing way. With that goes a critique of traditional social science with its systematic disregard for women. As Leacock and Etienne note:

'The entire conceptual framework of anthropology and, as a result, the data on which generalizations are based, suffer from ethnocentric and male-centred bias.

... The view of men as social actors and of women as both peripheral and passive has long determined not only theorizing but also the perception, the selection, and the organization of data. (p.4) Several of the articles (particularly those by Leacock, Grumet, Nash, Silverblatt) use historical reconstructions from the ethnographic record to show the characteristics of the relationships between women and men at the time of contact. Repeatedly, these ar-

ticles show that previously held notions about the sexual division of labour and the status of women are inadequate or wrong. Always, they show that women traditionally played a more important role in their societies than they were given credit for.

A second theme that runs through the book stresses the importance of a historical perspective. As Leacock and Etienne point out: 'When historic periods are not clearly defined, it is tempting — but unjustified — to reconstruct to the lowest common denominator. Worse is the tendency to treat the present, whenever the effects of change subsequent to colonization are not flagrantly visible, as if it were an intact remnant of the unchanged past.' (p.5) When history is taken into account, the record shows time and time again that:

'When Western capitalistic systems expand upon egalitarian communal societies, their actions involve the introduction and imposition of features such as the structure for general male dominance over females based materially on preferential male access to strategic resources; private ownership of land and a money

economy; overall inequality in the form of differential access to privileges and resources which lead to the formation of socioeconomic classes; and an emphasis on the nuclear family, supported by a wage-earning male, as the ideal domestic unit.' (Buenaventura-Posso and Brown p. 124)

The book also documents, however, the many ways that colonized peoples, especially women, have resisted imperialist intrusions. At a recent UN conference on women in Copenhagen some delegates argued that they could not discuss 'women's issues' when poverty, under-development and class struggle issues were so overwhelmingly important. This collection of articles shows very clearly the false character of that debate. Colonization and the oppression of women have always gone hand in hand; it is essential to fight on both fronts and to build alliances between them. The editors conclude their introduction by saying: 'Because the overall effects of colonization were detrimental to women, a situation they did not accept passively, it was inevitable that antagonism between the sexes should develop and

that, in a short-term perspective, the interests of women and men should not always coincide. In a long-term perspective, however, the forms of resistance adopted by colonized women corresponded with the interest of colonized men, whose advantage over women was only relative to their own oppression. The unified action of women and men in Third World revolutionary movements today demonstrates their common interests and their common understanding. We hope that the present work will encourage support of their struggles by furthering understanding of the relationship between our own cause, as feminists, and theirs.' (p.22) ©

### **God's Galloping Girl: The Peace River Diaries of Monica Storrs**

*Edited by W. L. Morton with the assistance of Vera K. Fast, University of British Columbia Press, 1979, pp.370, hardcover \$22.00.*

*Jacqueline Gresko*  
The diaries of Monica Storrs should be recommended reading for Western and social historians but women who actually lived through the Depression on frontier farms should be warned not to read them. For *God's Galloping Girl: the Peace River Diaries of Monica Storrs, 1929-1931* evokes time, place and experience vividly, sometimes almost too vividly.

Monica Storrs' accounts of her first two years as an Anglican parishworker in northeastern British Columbia plunge the reader back into the years 1929 to 1931. The atmosphere of those early Depression days comes alive via beliefs expressed in her journals. Monica, a 41-year-old spinster answered 'the call' of an

Anglican missionary in Canada:

'Can you ride? Go to the Peace River in British Columbia — fine country; lots of fine people going in; NO CHURCH; lots of children; lots of mosquitoes — just the place for you, Storrs.'

Storrs went to Peace River, boarded with a single lady homesteader friend and began her work teaching Sunday school, visiting church members, and organizing Guides and Scouts. Her background reveals why, in those days, it was not unusual that Monica Storrs would undertake such a mission. As the daughter of the dean of Rochester Cathedral, she had done parish and youth work and had volunteered for Sunday work in a First World War munitions plant. When, after the death of her parents she was no longer held by family duties, she trained for service in the church and in the Empire. The editor of her diaries, W. L. Morton, points out the importance of the tradition 'that quietly held that the wealth and civilization of England, at their height in the golden years before 1914, should be available and be given to those in need of support on the far frontiers of the Empire.' Various Anglican organizations had taken up this 'burden of Empire', providing funds and staff for Western Canadian missions.

The journal-letters which Monica Storrs wrote to her supporters recreate not only the values shared by emigrants, but also the physical environment of their destination. Her circuits on foot, by horse and later by car and rail show us that last North American frontier, the Peace River Country in the early '30s. She goes to its towns, such as Fort St. John:

'a perfectly hideous scattered dump of about a dozen wooden shanties, vaguely springing up on each side of a straight mud road which crosses a high

plateau with a fine view of distant hills. The contrast between the view and the buildings is so pitiful it makes me rather despair of the future of Canada.'

She treks out on visits to the settlers' log shacks. They looked 'very small and humble from the outside', but were 'really indistinguishable from cattle sheds'. However, Russian settlers on the North Peace had houses 'in some ways more picturesque and homelike'. These architectural appraisals are complemented by descriptions of the rigours of the climate, the problems of the seasons, the joys of viewing the Northern Lights.

Monica Storrs' diaries give readers a firm sense of Peace River as a region in the 1930s, but especially of the experience of women settlers there. Though she herself was single, 40, English and relatively wealthy for the district, she shared the settlers' joy in building new homes and suffered common difficulties. Her toothaches and neuralgia disrupted her work and necessitated long, painful trips to the doctor. Her reports show that some married women who had similar complaints had to keep on going at home as best they could. Biology was women's destiny; pregnancy, their career. For the lonely, overworked homestead wives there was no escape other than death or desertion. Monica Storrs tells us of those who did die, those who ran away, and most poignantly of those who stayed. For example, Monica and her companion visited one refined middle-aged woman who was married to a 'strong, hard man who (lived) for knocking about and trying new lands and new jobs.' She seemed to grudge the arrival of her first female callers at her latest rude shack. She did not answer Monica's question about how she liked the country with the usual affirmative 'fine', but went over to stir the soup and stood crying with her back to her guests.

This account from the 1930s in Peace River might have been written about any woman in any part of Western Canada. Most women there were burdened, many were lonely and bitter; yet most held on. I would hesitate to pass *God's Galloping Girl* on to any Depression survivor without warning her first of its realism regarding women. That quality of the book is, however what makes me want to recommend the diaries to historians and to my students.

I have some reservations about doing so because of the limitations of W.L. Morton's introduction to them. He does treat what he considers their main themes: missionary service, frontier history and regional geography. In one line of the postscript Morton lauds the 'infinitely lonely and cruelly burdened women'. He does not adequately explain women's experiences in the Peace River country in the early '30s. He speaks of the settlers moving there as 'men who had read of Peace River and sought the region for its promise; ... mostly men of some sense of adventure'. Yet according to Monica Storrs many women shared in pioneering and some, like Monica herself went at it independently. Modern students using her diaries as a sourcebook on women's lives on the frontier in the early 20th century need a better guide than Morton's introduction provides. Morton will not help them understand why Monica always kowtowed to male missionaries and why she did not become a minister herself. Why didn't she bring birth control pamphlets to all those mothers of large families? ©

### **The Subtle Revolution: Women at Work**

*edited by Ralph E. Smith, The Urban Institute, 1979, pp.279, \$7.50 paperback Bonnie Fox*